

RED STAR VERSUS RISING SUN

Volume 1: The Conquest of
Manchuria 1931-1938



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ASIA@WAR
SERIES

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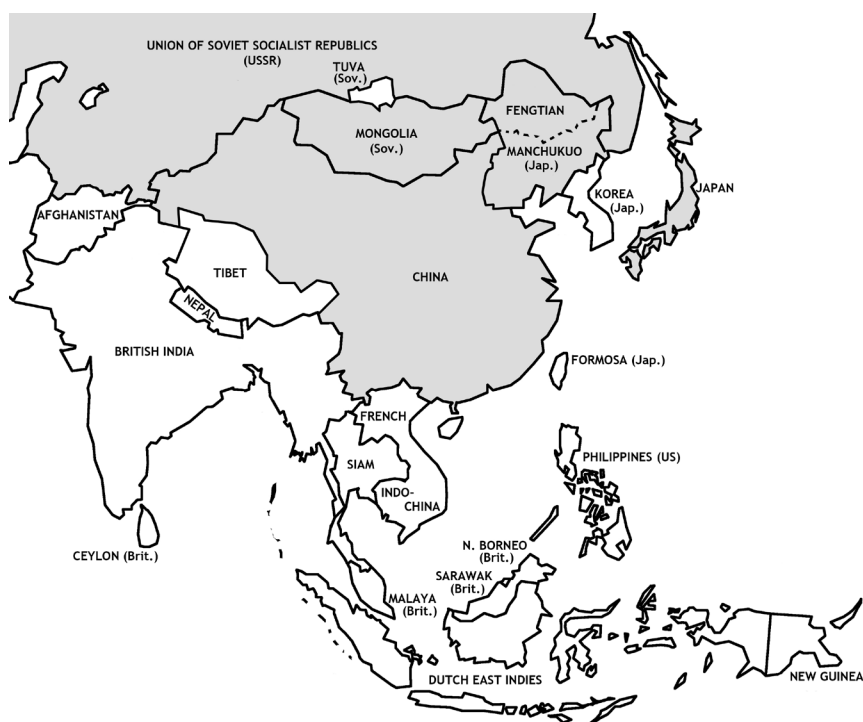
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Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events. Mentions of Japanese individuals in this volume are following the Japanese convention, with family name coming first and given name second.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Anti-aircraft	MPRA	Mongolian People's Republic Army
AT	Anti-tank	OKDVA	<i>Otdelynaya Krasnoznamennaya Dalyanevostochnaya Armiya</i> (Separate Far Eastern Red Banner Army)
AGS	Army General Staff (Imperial Japanese)	PoW	Prisoner of War
BT	<i>Bystrokhodny Tank</i> (Fast Tank)	NKVD	<i>Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del</i> (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, also in charge of guarding the borders)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party	NRA	National Revolutionary Army; the KMT's Army
CMC	Central Military Commission (parallel national defence organisation of the Communist Party of China)	RKKA	<i>Raboche-Krest'yanski Krasnoi Armiiy</i> (Workers and Peasants Red Army, or more colloquially, the Red or Soviet Army)
CO	Commanding Officer	SIGINT	Signal Intelligence
HQ	headquarters	SMR	South Manchurian Railway
HMG	Heavy Machine Gun. In Japanese terminology, this included 7.7mm calibre machine guns, which were classified as heavy.	USA	United States of America
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union)
IJAAF	Imperial Japanese Army Air Force	VVS RKKA	<i>Voenno-Vozdushnye Sily Raboche Krestiyanskoy Krasnoy Armii</i> (Air Force of the Workers and Peasants Red Army. More colloquially, VVS)
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy	WIA	Wounded in Action
KIA	Killed in Action		
KMT	Kuomintang of China (also 'Guomindang'; the Nationalist Party of China or the Chinese Nationalist Party)		
LMG	Light Machine Gun		
MIA	Missing in Action		

PREFACE

In overall military histories of the Second World War, or even global histories covering the interwar period, northern Asia is largely perceived as a sideshow even though at the time, events such as the 1932 "First Shanghai Incident" attracted international scrutiny. This of course, is an inheritance of an era when the world was Western-dominated. However, Asia as a whole, and primarily China, is well underway to resuming its place as one of the, if not the main, centres of the world, as it used to be virtually until the 16th century. This context makes it only natural to revisit the past and place a greater emphasis on studying events that shaped contemporary local perceptions. To take but one example, the "China Incident" might be seen as a distant sideshow for Europe in the context of the Second World War, but is a national cataclysm in the Chinese psyche, and rightly so; the country was utterly devastated, civilians suffered from atrocities in their millions whilst the warring sides conducted campaigns of massive proportions when hundreds of thousands of soldiers from both sides fought with each other over gigantic areas.

Of course, the plunging of northern, and then all of Asia, into war is indissociable with the rise of Japan as an aggressive imperialist power from the end on the 19th century onwards. Correspondingly, the expansion of the Empire into mainland Asia placed it on a collision course with Russia, and later with the Soviet Union. Whilst the period of political appeasement in Japan at a time when the Soviets were preoccupied with rebuilding their new and devastated country quietened the waters during the 20s, new Japanese encroachments in northern China placed the two powers on a collision course.

This was no mere geopolitical rivalry either as, from the Japanese perspective, Communism was a deadly threat; the very poison that

could become the nemesis of their own imperial ideology. Before long, the *raison d'être* of the Imperial Japanese Army became to fight and win against the RKKA and by doing so conquer the Russian Far East. From Moscow's perspective, Japan alone was a serious enough threat, but, with the emergence of the Third Reich in 1933, a potential joint invasion from both Germany in the west and Japan in the east became a strategic nightmare, especially as the other "capitalist" powers were expected to be all too happy to let such an alliance liquidate the sole communist country in the world in their stead. Thus, both the Japanese and Soviets saw an all-out war between the two northern Asian giants as unavoidable. As it turned out, this full-scale war never happened, or rather, happened only in the summer of 1945, when the Japanese had grown so exhausted that the resulting campaign, despite its massive proportions, is largely perceived as yet another "interesting, but secondary" affair compared to the equally gigantic Allied offensives that broke the back of Nazi Germany between 1944 and 1945.

In between, however, the IJA and the RKKA fought each other on several occasions, foremost at Changkufeng in 1938 and Nomonhan in 1939, with the second of these clashes having wide-ranging repercussions on the world scene, perhaps to the point of changing the course of global history. The first volume of this mini-series attempts to give an account of the extremely complex set of events which led to the clashes of 1938, 1939 and ultimately 1945, whilst describing the host of actors involved. Of course, Japanese expansion into mainland Asia, and Soviet reactions to this remains indissociable with China where both sides attempted to gain as much influence as they could, until the Empire of the Rising Sun found itself embroiled in full-fledged war with the Empire of the Middle

Sun, the latter fighting with the support of the Soviet Union, despite being at war with the Soviets in 1929. Therefore, and whilst describing the related military operations in detail would necessitate an entire mini-series of volumes, it is still necessary to provide in this volume at least an overview of these developments, if only because they shaped the thinking of both Japanese and Soviet leaders.

The reader must be forewarned that all of these events are mainly apprehended through the Japanese perspective, for the already mentioned reasons and also simply because English-language documentation is much more easily available, noticeably thanks to the existence of the US Army commissioned monographs recording Japanese operations and a series of instrumental works such as those of Alvin D. Coox, who dedicated a lifetime studying the Changkufeng and Nomonhan incidents in almost minute detail and interviewed hundreds of Japanese veterans in the process.

As always, such endeavour would not had been possible without the support and contributions by a number of individuals. The



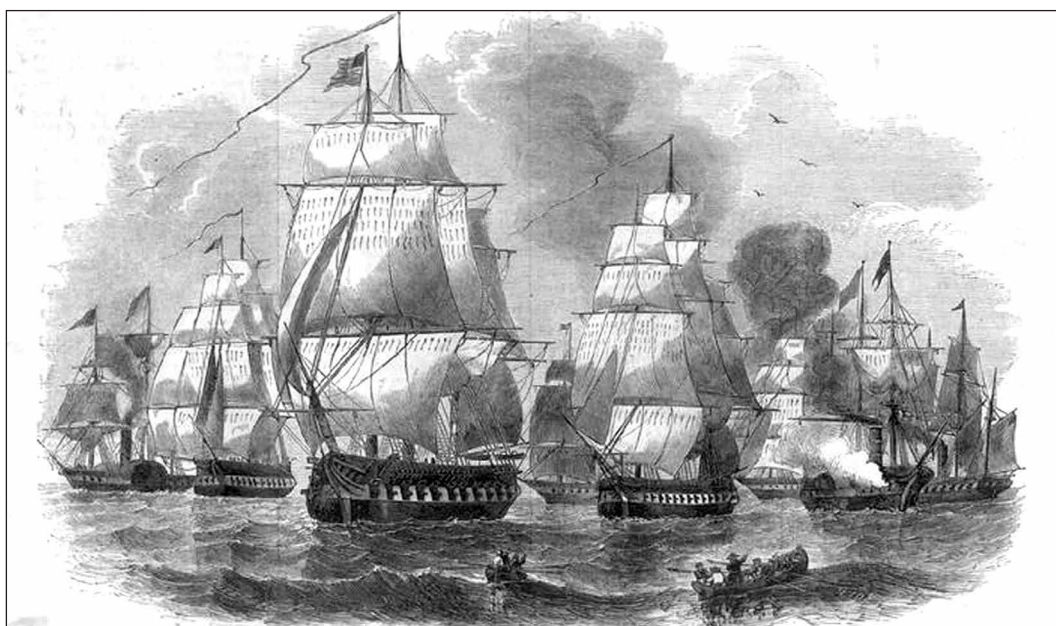
Japanese soldiers taking a break during their advance in Manchuria during the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

author would therefore like to thank Albert Grandolini for granting the use of pictures from his extensive collection, Tom Cooper, as always, for his invaluable advice and the Helion team for its support and hard work which made the coming into being of this book possible. The author would like to thank in particular Andy Miles for his editing of the manuscript.

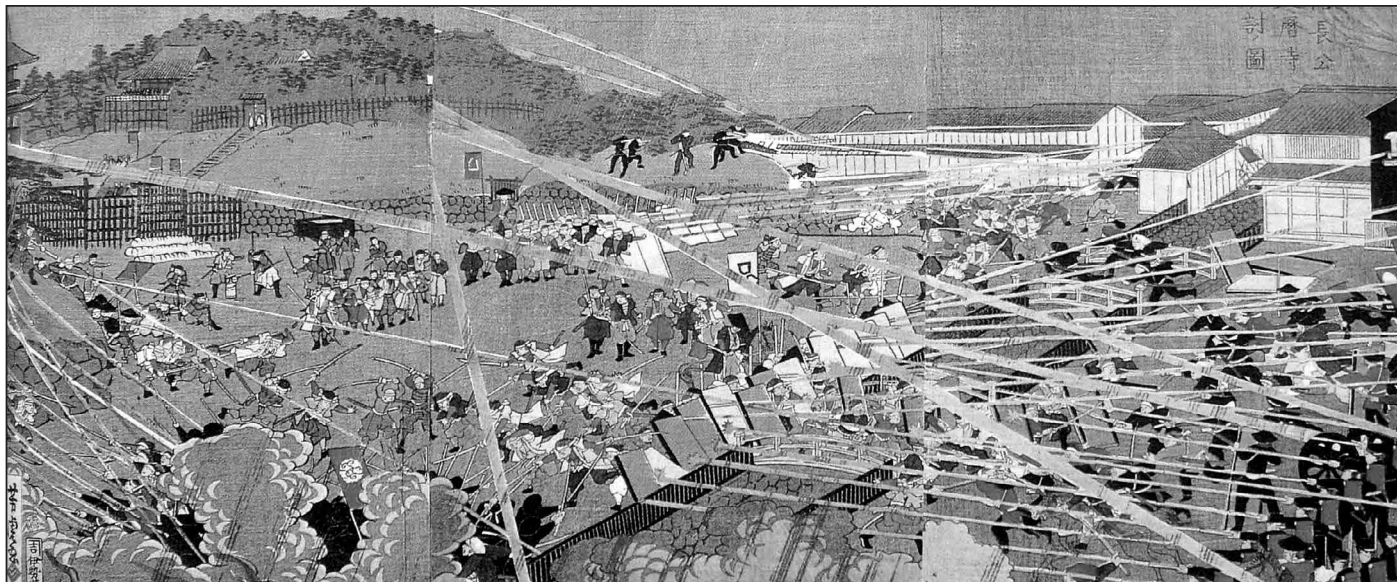
INTRODUCTION

By the middle of the 19th century, Japan was still ruled by the Bakufu – also known as the Tokugawa Shogunate – via a series of feudal domains called the Han, whilst the Emperor remained a largely symbolic figurehead. The later regime had closed the country to foreign influences for almost two centuries after a series of peasant revolts suspected to have been initiated by Portuguese Jesuits through the spread of Christianity. In 1853, the visit of the infamous “Black Ships” under US Commodore Matthew Perry and the subsequent visit of a Russian flotilla soon thereafter forced the Bakufu to eventually open several ports to foreign trade before signing in 1858 the proverbial “Unequal Treaties” with France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (USA) which forced the country to open itself to

trade, grant extraterritoriality rights to the citizens of these four powers and limit its import taxes.



The appearance off the Japanese coasts of the “Black Ships”, the US Navy squadron under Commodore Matthew Perry, humiliated the Tokugawa Shogunate; there was nothing the Japanese could do against such warships. (Open source)



A painting of the Battle of Ueno on 4 July 1868, where the Satsuma and Choshu domains' forces defeated a Shogunate force in the vicinity of Edo. (Open source)



Samurai of the Satsuma Clan during the Boshin War period. (Felice Beato/Open source)

These concessions fatally undermined the legitimacy of the regime until the Choshu domain, one of the most powerful Han, rose against it, thus plunging the country into 10 years of conflict. Furthermore, in July and August 1863, a series of clashes occurred between US, French and British warships and the Choshu and Satsuma clans' coastal batteries and vessels. The Japanese were completely outfought, with the Royal Navy destroying a large part of Kagoshima with incendiary rockets as a result.

Finally, the later clans entered into an open alliance against the Bakufu in 1867 in the name of an imperial restoration in favour of Emperor Mutsuhito, later Meiji, who ascended the throne the

very same year. Both sides in the Boshin War (the Dragon War) which raged for most of 1868 had invested heavily in acquiring modern weapons, but the Bakufu lagged behind in this regard. The Choshu clan not only managed to acquire large numbers of modern firearms and guns abroad but had also created a dedicated rifle unit, the Kiheitai, trained to operate following Western tactics and was thus vastly superior to other feudal forces which fought still largely according to antiquated patterns. By the end of the year, the reformers had overwhelmed the last resistance of the Bakafu's most loyal supporters, mainly the warriors of the Aizu clan.

However, Japan was not entirely done with civil war. The abolition by the new government of the samurai class, as well as the domains which supported them, threw large numbers of warriors

into poverty and led to several uprisings, which culminated with the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877. This was led by Saigo Takamori, a charismatic figure who had rallied a large number of dissatisfied samurai around him, until the central government dispatched the still nascent Imperial Japanese Army to suppress it. After several months of campaigning on the island of Kyushu, the Army managed to decisively defeat the ill-equipped but highly-motivated insurgents at the Battle of Shiroyama in September of the same year.

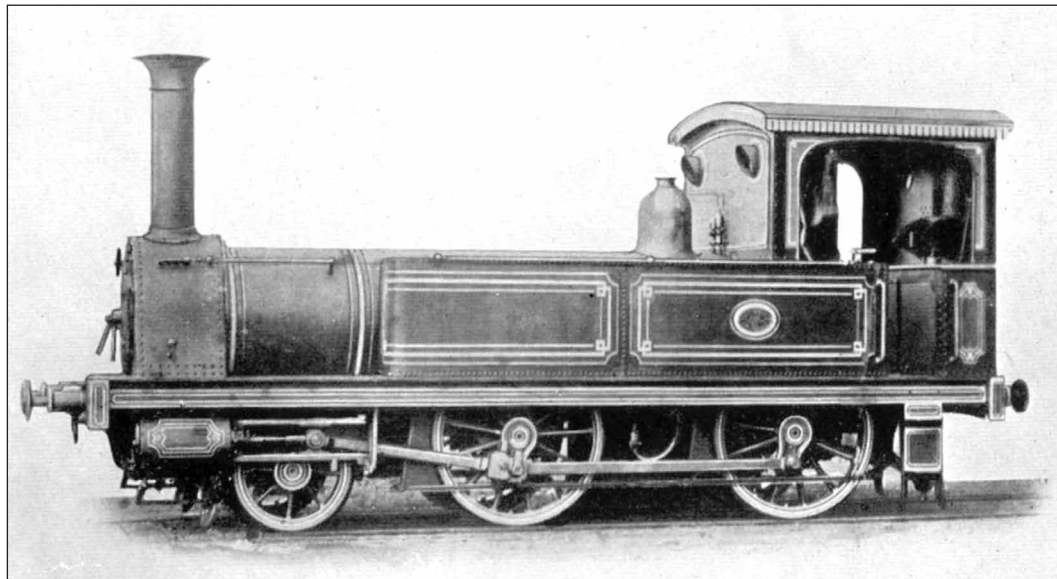


A painting of the battle of Battle of Shiroyama, where the still nascent Imperial Japanese Army defeated the Satsuma Rebellion. (Kagoshima Museum/Open source)

Fukoku-kyohei

Once the Bakufu were defeated, the small group of influential leaders – mostly from the Satsuma and Choshu clans – who succeeded it engaged in a deliberate policy of modernising the country along Western lines whilst keeping its cultural essence. This culminated with the promulgation in 1889 of the first Asian constitution, consecrating what could only be described as an oligarchic parliamentary regime. Indeed, partly reorganising the country along the European model was understood as a precondition to be acknowledged as an equal by the Western powers, whilst mastering their technologies and developing the economy was equally necessary to fund and support the military forces needed to deter the kind of invasion or intervention such as those which brought the once mighty Chinese empire to its knees. This principle was in time embodied in slogans such as *fukoku-kyohei* (Enrich the Country, Strengthen the Military).

The new regime built at an accelerated pace a centralised state and laid the basis of a new definition of nationhood, embodied in the concept of *kokutai* (national spirit) which in turn was inextricably



One of the first steam locomotives imported in Japan from the United Kingdom in 1871. (Open source)

linked to the imperial dynasty, the Shinto cult and a set of traditional Confucianist values – all whilst initiating a deliberate policy of importing and mastering Western technologies. Accordingly, between 1873 and 1877, 2.45 percent of the central government's ordinary expenditure was dedicated to the hiring of Western experts whilst another 2.67 percent was spent on sending Japanese to study abroad and thus acquire a wide array of knowledge and expertise before returning to the home islands. In the meantime, an overall school system came into being in 1871. Two years later, primary school attendance reached 28.1 percent whilst in 1910, this

number reached 98.1 percent. Secondary schools followed a similar development with their numbers almost quadrupling between 1891 and 1903 and were training around 100,000 youngsters in the latter year. In the meantime, the Imperial University opened its doors in Tokyo in 1886, followed by the Kyoto Imperial University in 1897 whilst a wide array of more specialised academies and schools had also been set up, thus providing the country with an influx of the well-trained and educated workforce it needed to sustain its expansion.

The Japanese economy remained essentially rural during the decades that followed the restoration and the flourishing of trade with the external world relied foremost on the export of goods such as raw silk yarn, tea and marine products, whose earnings could be spent in acquiring the know-how and technologies which made possible the gradual coming into being of local light industry and ultimately heavy industries. The state however remained a key player in the process, notably by directly or indirectly funding industrial ventures. Even institutions such as the Army, and foremost the Navy, proved instrumental in creating large-scale industrial facilities such as the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal. In turn, these eased the rise of a galaxy of private subcontractors or provided a market for a limited number of fast-growing private-owned financial-industrial conglomerates, such as Mitsubishi, known as the *Zaibatsu*. Of course, economic growth was closely linked with the development of communication infrastructure, such as the expansion of harbours and ports as well as the national railway system, with the latter totalling 2,250km of rail in 1890 whilst 10 years earlier, all major cities had been linked by telegraph. Thus, Emperor Meiji's reign, which lasted until his death in 1912, saw the transformation of Japan from a largely backward and ripe-for-the taking potential colony into a major regional power, acknowledged as such by the nations it had attempted to protect itself from. Indeed, by then, the Empire of the Rising Sun had already joined the club of predator imperialist

countries which had been so eager to conquer virtually the entire world during the previous century and had even managed to enter into an alliance with Great Britain, the mightiest of all, in 1902. With an economy roughly similar in size to nations such as Italy or Spain, and thus much smaller as those of the USA, Great Britain, France, Russia or Germany, the Japanese dragon was nonetheless no global powerhouse.¹

Meiji's Wars

Before long, Tokyo thus became determined to expand its regional influence although its government was realistic enough to avoid entering a collision course with other global powers whilst doing so. Thus, the annexation in 1879 of the Ryukyu Islands, already under Japanese influence for centuries, went largely unnoticed.

However, by then, Korea had already become a much larger source of concern because the weak kingdom was a traditional springboard for any invasion against Japan, whilst the weakened Chinese Qing dynasty, to which the Korean court traditionally swore allegiance, was looking increasingly unlikely to prevent Russia from expanding its influence in the peninsula. Hence, Japan gradually sought to reduce Chinese influence in Korea and replace it with its own, with the intent of transforming the hermit kingdom into a buffer zone and seal off an obvious avenue for Russian imperialism. In April 1885, and a few months after a failed Japanese-supported coup in Korea, Peking and Tokyo agreed to remove the small number of troops they held in Korea and to abstain from intervening militarily in the kingdom without prior notification to the other party. This proved short-lived however, as nine years later, in early 1894, a peasant uprising forced Korean King Gojong to request military support from the Qing court, which reacted by dispatching a brigade-sized detachment to help its vassal but failed to inform Tokyo beforehand.

Tokyo reacted by dispatching elements of the IJA's 5th Division in June, nominally to protect the roughly 9,000 strong Japanese community residing in the kingdom that had been targeted by Korean rioters.

This escalated into an open war between Japan and China, however, from 1 August 1894 on, to much surprise as Japan was still largely seen as an underdog compared to China.

During the following weeks, the bulk of the IJA's existing seven divisions were sent to the Asian mainland and organised into the 1st and the 2nd Armies. After its landing in the south of the kingdom, the 1st Army moved northward and seized Pyongyang on 16 September after a short battle, before continuing its advance toward the Yalu River, where it arrived in mid-October. Meanwhile, the Imperial Japanese Navy defeated the Chinese Peiyang Fleet at the Battle of the Yalu on 17 September 1894, thus paving the way for the landing of the 2nd Army on the Liaodong

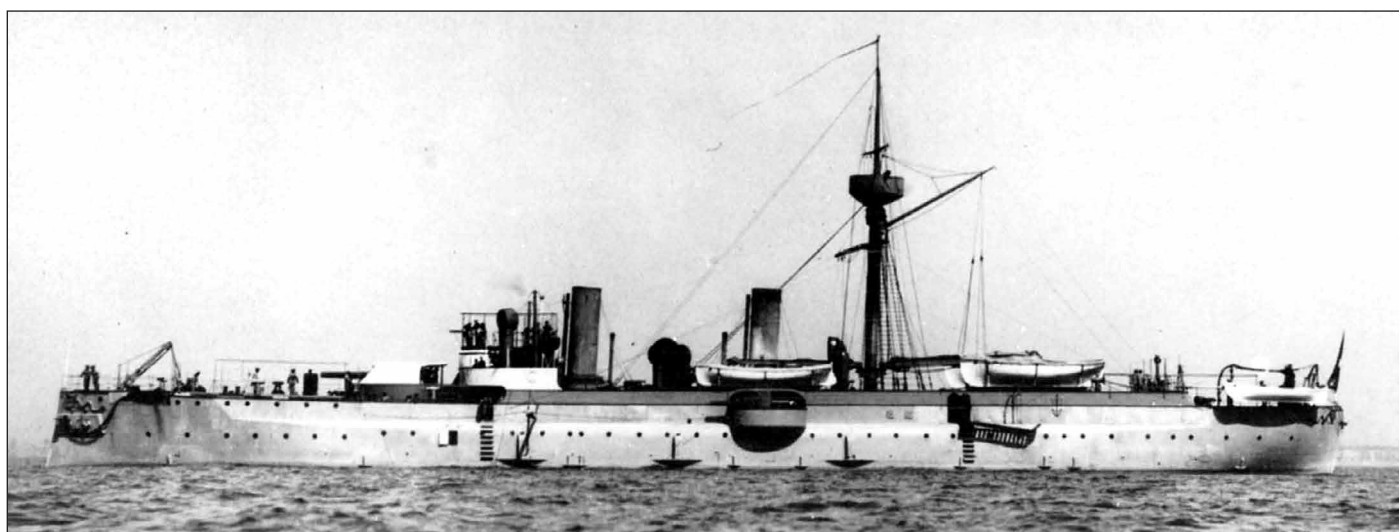


Japanese soldiers posing in front of the gates of Shuri Castle in Okinawa during the annexation of the Ryukyu Islands in 1879. This proved the first step of the Japanese Empire's expansion abroad. (Open source)

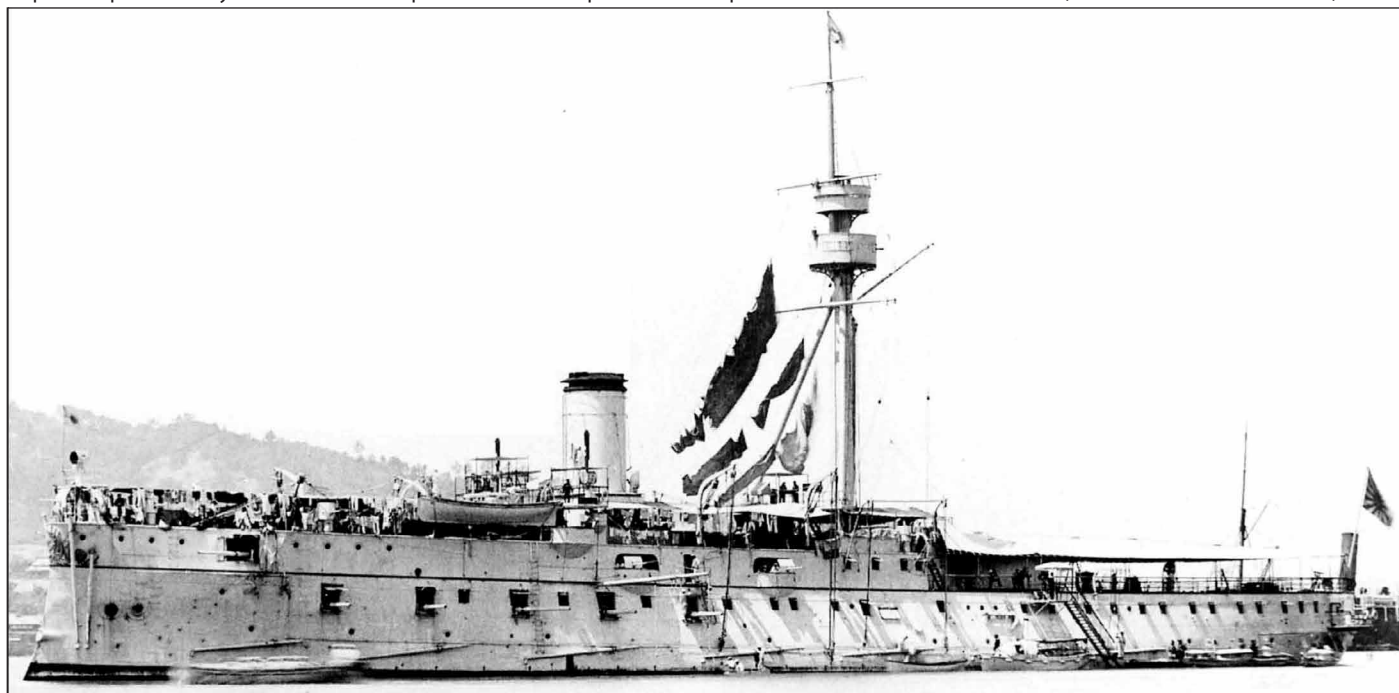


A group of Chinese officers in 1895. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

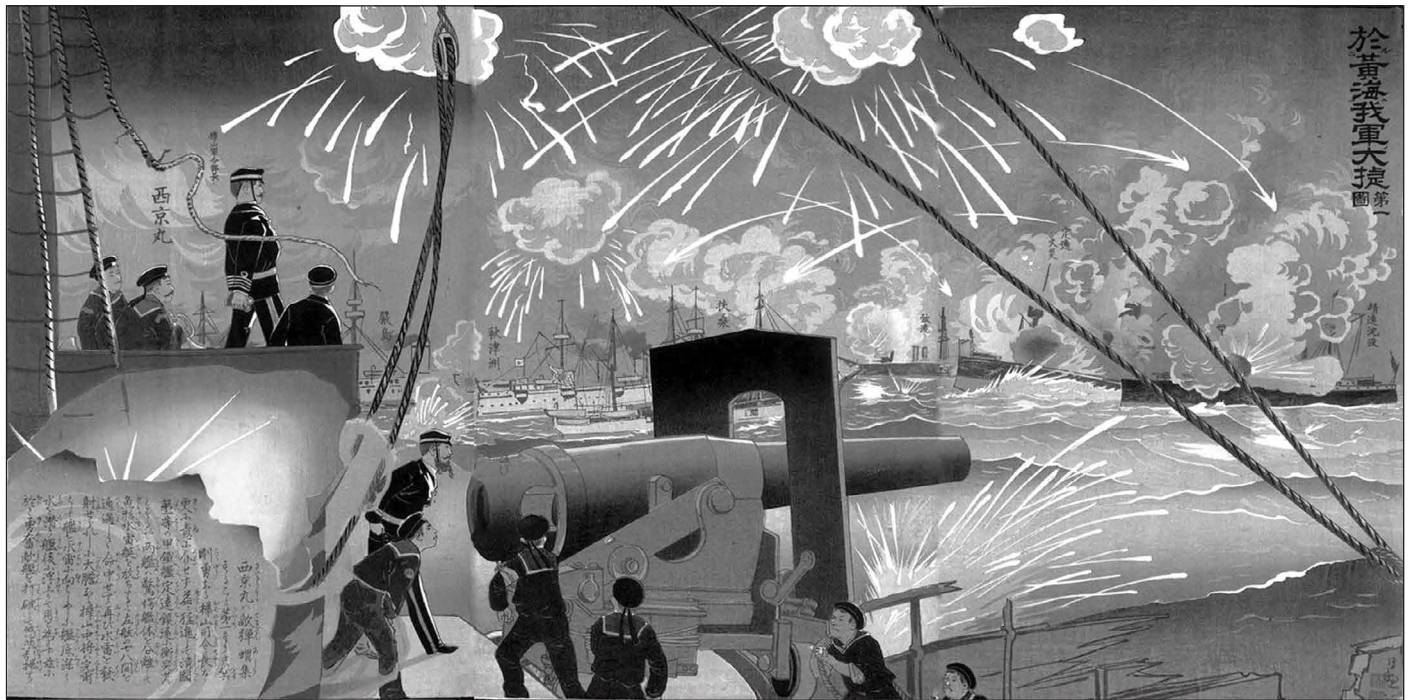
Peninsula a few weeks later.² By 21 November, it captured Port Arthur, while the 1st Army was advancing in Manchuria. Unable to stop the Japanese, and after the loss of the harbour of Weihaihei on the Shantung Peninsula after a short siege in March 1895, the Qing regime entered into peace talks which gave birth to the Treaty of Shimonoseki concluded on 17 April 1895. The latter was nothing short of a humiliation for China and a triumph for Japan, as Peking agreed to pay a large indemnity to Tokyo, give away its influence over Korea,



The Chinese battleship *Zhenyuan*. This warship, together with its sistership *Dingyuan*, both built in Germany, outclassed even the most powerful Imperial Japanese Navy vessels in terms of protection and firepower but this proved insufficient to turn the tide. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The Japanese Cruiser *Matsushima*, also engaged in the Battle of the Yalu River. This was, together with its sisterships *Hashidate* and *Itsukushima*, designed by famed naval engineer Émile Bertin, bought in France. They had a displacement of 4,000 tons, a top speed of 18 knots and their armament consisted of a single 12.6-inch gun and eleven 4.7-inch guns emplaced in barbettes on either side. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A depiction of the Battle of the Yalu River, shown from the Japanese side. Decisive in the Japanese victory was their much greater number of quick-firing small-calibre guns, which proved more efficient than larger but slower firing guns. (Open source)



A contemporary depiction of Japanese troops charging at the Battle of Tientsin during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. IJA units repeatedly impressed Western officers with their aggressiveness and willingness to take heavy casualties. (Open source)

and cede to Japan control over the Liaodong Peninsula, Formosa and to grant railway concessions in Manchuria.

With this victory, Japan at last began to be reckoned as a regional military powerhouse – albeit small – especially because the nascent Imperial Japanese Navy had proved its mettle by decisively defeating

the modern Chinese Peiyang Fleet during the Battle of the Yalu. There, the Japanese Combined Fleet sank five enemy ships for no loss to itself, despite the presence of the Chinese battleships *Dingyuan* and *Zhenyuan*, which were much more powerful than any similar Japanese vessel. On the other hand, the IJA's performance was

more of a mixed bag. Facing weak Chinese resistance, the Qing forces proved to be, with perhaps the exception of the Huai Army, a grouping of ill-equipped and ill-trained regional forces. The Japanese lost only 1,161 men killed during the conflict but its campaigning was plagued by logistical deficiencies and it had to mobilise tens of thousands of porters to overcome these during the war.

Furthermore, the subsequent annexation of Formosa went anything but flawlessly. The Japanese met with a large-scale insurgency from the local population and the IJA had to dispatch the Imperial Guard Division and the 2nd Division to quell it, losing 700 casualties in combat operations whilst doing so, and another staggering 20,000 due to epidemics and inadequate sanitary support. Last but not least, the Treaty of Shimonoseki triggered fierce opposition from France, Germany and Russia and these eventually forced Japan to back off and give up the Liaodong Peninsula. To add salt to the wound, Moscow seized the very same peninsula two years later and soon began works to link it by rail to the Trans-Siberian Railway via Manchuria, thus causing an uproar in Japan and setting the two empires onto a collision course. Aside of the annexation of Formosa, the main Japanese gain was a free hand to gradually tighten its grip on Korea unopposed, until its formal annexation to the Empire in 1910.³

Facing the Boxers

The next major Japanese military expedition abroad took place in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion; an anti-foreign uprising supported by the Qing court. Whilst Tokyo proved initially unenthusiastic to provide troops to support the international force tasked with relieving the besieged foreign legations in Peking, Japanese politics finally gave way to London's demands to dispatch a strong IJA contingent to make up for the inability of the overextended British Army – heavily engaged in the 2nd Anglo-Boer War in South Africa – to deploy troops in sufficient numbers. In the end, the bulk of the 5th Division, with 13,000 men, went into China where it played a crucial role during the campaign if only because the whole international expeditionary force included a total of just 33,000 men. Indeed, IJA troops impressed Western officers with their discipline and their willingness to attack even if at the cost of heavy casualties.⁴ A crucial consequence of the war was that Moscow deployed troops in Manchuria in the wake of Boxer attacks against the newly built Russian railways, and it soon turned out that these were to remain, thus setting the stage for a much more massive confrontation a few years later. Another legacy of Japanese involvement in the Boxer War was the permanent garrisoning of an IJA force in the vicinity of Peking, which was to later become the North China Garrison Army.



Japanese soldiers forming up and demonstrating how much better-equipped they were compared to their Chinese opponents. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Pyrrhic victories

With the Russians now firmly established in Manchuria, Japanese fears about Russian attempts to establish themselves in Korea grew only stronger and on 21 April 1903, the Prime Minister determined to seek a withdrawal of Russian troops from Manchuria through diplomacy, and if this failed, through war. Almost one year later, on 4 February 1904, an imperial conference concluded that parleys between the two countries had stalemated and took the decision to go to war. Diplomatic relations were severed two days later whilst the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) launched a largely ineffective surprise attack against the Russian fleet at Port Arthur during the night of the 8 to 9 February 1904, a few hours before a formal declaration of war was issued.

Despite its initial failure, the IJN still managed to blockade the bulk of the Russian Pacific Fleet in the harbour, thus allowing convoys of Japanese troops to move unhindered toward the Asian continent, repeating in essence the plan of operation applied against China a few years before, but on a much larger scale. On 12 February, the first elements of the three-division-strong 1st Army landed in Korea and advanced northward, crossing the Yalu River during the seven-day Battle of the Yalu from 25 April to 2 May 1904. Three days later, the 2nd Army landed in the Liaotung Peninsula, severing the connexion between Port Arthur and the mass of the Russian forces in Manchuria, before advancing toward the latter to unite with the 1st Army, whilst the smaller 4th Army also arrived in theatre.

The task of investing Port Arthur fell on the 3rd Army, which began to besiege it at the end of July 1904. However, the incompetence of its commander, Lieutenant General Nogi Marasuke, soon transformed the siege into a bloody slugging match, a forerunner of what was to come in Europe a decade later, with the Japanese infantry repeatedly sent into frontal attacks against a well-entrenched enemy. It is thus only on 26 November that the 3rd Army gained a decisive success by seizing Hill 203, where it could emplace its artillery to pound both the Russian town and fleet. At last, the garrison surrendered on 2 January 1905, but the victory had cost the Japanese 59,000 casualties.



A group of Russian soldiers at Port Arthur in 1904. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A row of Russian field guns in battery in the plains of Manchuria. Field artillery and machine guns were to cause unheard of numbers of casualties during the war – a forebearer of the slaughter that would occur only a decade later in Europe. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Japanese troops from the 1st Army landing in Korea. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Meanwhile, between 25 August and 3 September 1904, the IJA had attempted to annihilate the six Russian corps, with 14 divisions, 158,000 men and nearly 600 guns between them, defending the city of Liaoyang. Whilst the 1st Army assaulted the Russian centre frontally, the 2nd and 4th Armies launched a pincer attack against the enemy flanks. The manoeuvre produced mixed results; the eight Japanese divisions involved forced the Russians to withdraw from the town but failed to encircle and annihilate them. This was again at a staggering cost with 23,000 casualties out of a total strength of 120,000 men suffered in eight days.

The next would-be decisive battle took place in Mukden between 22 February and 10 March 1905 and proved even more devastating. To defend the town, the Russians had deployed 11 corps controlled by three armies, with roughly 300,000 men in total, and had built an extensive line of field fortifications south of the town. The IJA's five armies involved in the battle, with roughly 200,000 men in total, initially launched a series of fruitless assaults against the Russian line. The battle soon turned into a stalemate, with each side's artillery duelling the other and plastering enemy positions. At last, the Japanese regained their momentum by launching their 3rd Army around the flank of the Russian positions until it threatened their rear, whilst the Russian commanders failed to react in time because of a lack of coordination between themselves and a blizzard which added to the confusion, especially as the other Japanese armies soon launched a general attack against the Russian line. However, the battle failed to be decisive again because the Japanese proved unable to prevent the Russians from withdrawing from Mukden in relatively good order. The

Japanese suffered around 70,000 casualties and the Russians roughly 90,000.

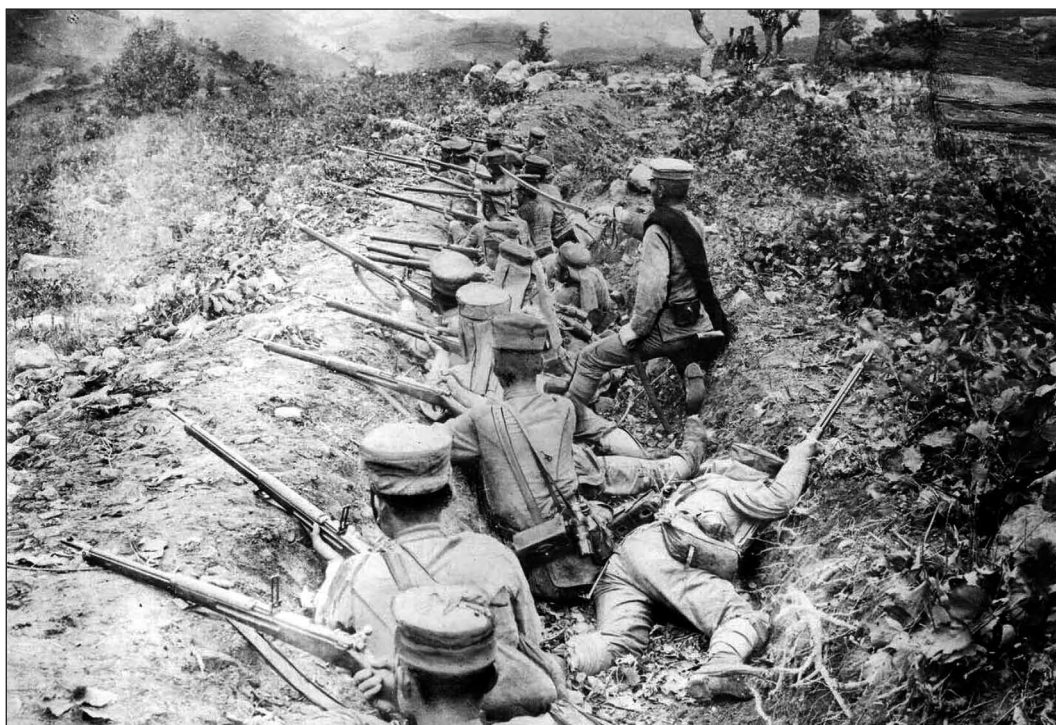
Breaking point

Whilst Japan was stunning the world by repeatedly defeating the mighty Russian bear, IJA senior officers were far less enthusiastic. When in mid-March 1905, Prime Minister Yamagata Aritomo requested that Field Marshal Oyama Iwao, commander of the IJA forces in Manchuria, launch new offensives, the latter declined because of the losses suffered at Mukden as well as an endemic lack of supplies and ammunition. Indeed, the Army itself had been utterly wrongfooted by the immense amounts of casualties and the munitions expenditure associated with modern warfare and had entered into the conflict with logistics calculations based on its recent experience against China.

Logistics as a whole remained a dramatic concern all through the conflict, with the rear regularly failing to provide the front with what it needed – to the point that on one occasion, the entire 2nd Army had to live on half-rations for weeks. Worse still, Japanese industry was not able to reach the levels of production necessary to cope with the IJA ammunition expenditure and the country had to pass orders for 450,000 shells to British and German factories. When the war ended, the Army had lost around 60,000 soldiers and officers dead, about two thirds in combat and one third due to illnesses such as beriberi or typhoid, despite a well-developed health infrastructure including field bacteriological laboratories. In turn, even the reputedly stoic Japanese soldiers began to revolt in the face of such horrendous losses; on one occasion during the siege of Port Arthur, a full regiment refused to repeat an assault against Russian fortifications. Furthermore, the losses had also choked the Japanese public, whilst the costs of the war were extremely heavy with 53 percent of the national budget dedicated to it, whilst Tokyo was still forced to borrow massively abroad. Japan was winning one battle after another but these were only pyrrhic victories as the country was exhausting itself whilst doing so. Unsurprisingly, on 23 March 1905, Prime Minister Yamagata announced to the cabinet that the



Japanese infantrymen in their well dug-in position, showing their Type 30 Arisaka Rifles. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A squad of IJA troopers, readying themselves to advance further. Of note is the officer carrying a Western-style sword, adopted by the Army in the aftermath of the Meiji restoration more as a sign of modernisation than because these were superior to Japanese traditional katana. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

war should be concluded through negotiations as a military solution was unreachable.⁵

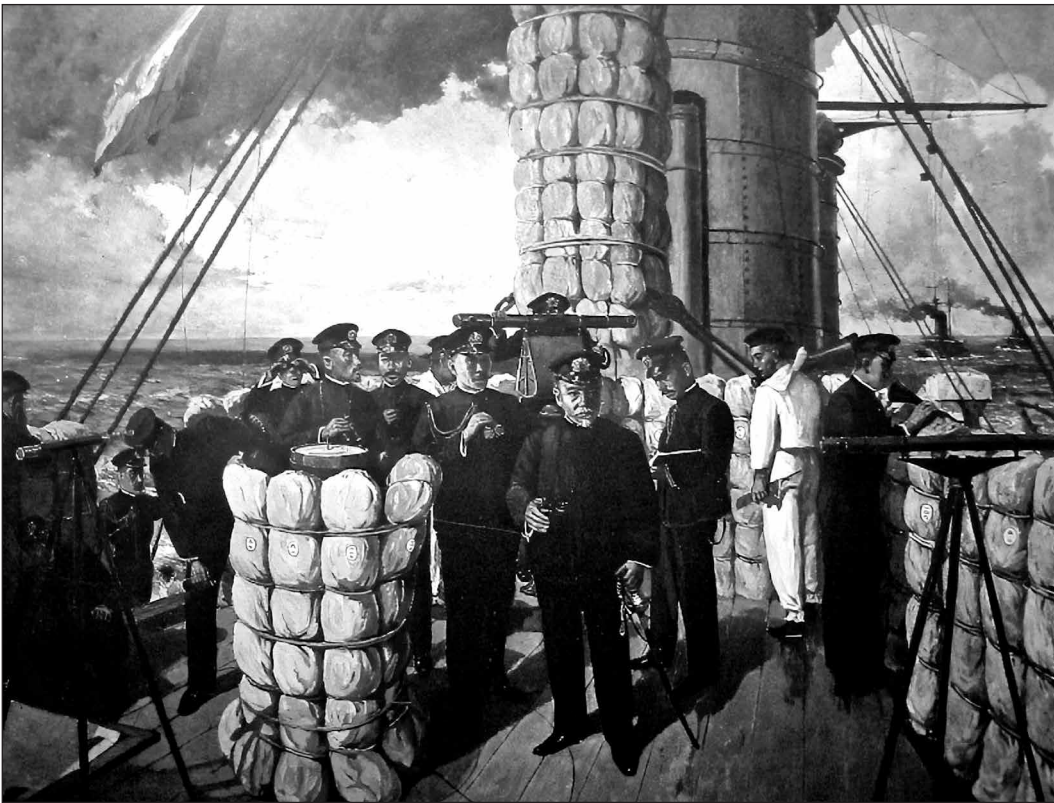
Kaigun triumphant

In August 1904, the Tsar had ordered his Baltic Fleet to reinforce the beleaguered Pacific Fleet. The Russian ships left anchor in October, beginning an epic eight-month journey plagued with innumerable difficulties. The fleet passed through Singapore in April 1905 – much too late to save the Pacific Fleet which had surrendered in Port Arthur in early January – and reached Saigon in early May before beginning the last leg of its voyage toward Vladivostok.

On 27 May, the 38 ships of the Baltic Fleet were intercepted by the IJN Combined Fleet whilst sailing through Tushima Strait. That



A well-protected Russian heavy howitzer. As always, artillery remained Moscow's forte during this conflict. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A painting showing Admiral Togo, commander of the Combined Fleet, on the bridge of the flagship *Mikasa* during the Battle of Tsushima. (Open source)

day, the Japanese battleline, consisting of faster ships, managed to cross the T of the Russian fleet, whose vessels, aside from being worn out by their long voyage, varied considerably in terms of speed and performance. During the following night, Japanese light forces continued to attack the Russians and by morning, the latter capitulated. Only four cruisers, two destroyers and two steamers managed to escape one of the worst naval disasters ever and rally in neutral or friendly ports. Altogether, 32 Russian ships had been lost, 4,830 sailors and officers were killed and another 5,917 taken

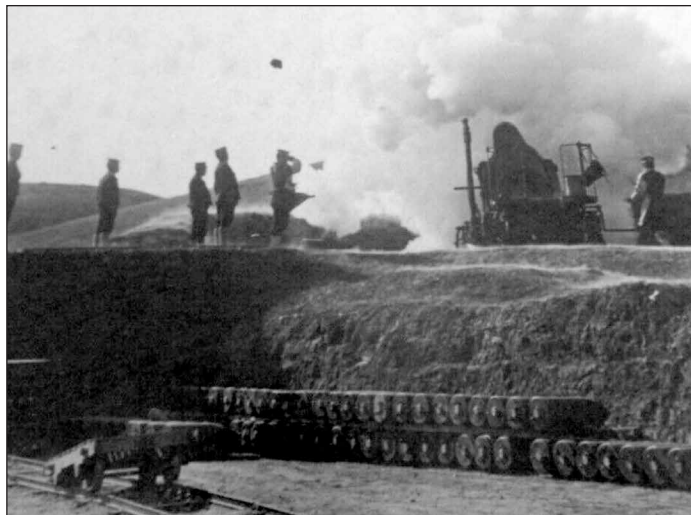
prisoner. The IJN lost 110 men killed and three torpedo boats sunk, whilst another 11 ships had been damaged.

This naval triumph did little to change the strategic situation however; Japan was exhausted and needed to end the war. Fortunately, Tsar Nicolas II was also willing to do the same because he was facing major unrest in his own country where the conflict had become more and more unpopular since its beginning, whilst the uninterrupted series of defeats against "inferior" Asians had damaged the throne's legitimacy. Moscow thus agreed to the US-mediated peace talks requested by Japan, and these were concluded by the signature of the Treaty of Portsmouth on 5 September 1905. Whilst Japan did not secure the payment of war reparations as it had hoped for, it still gained the Liaotung Peninsula, the southern part of Sakhalin, control of the former Russian railway lines in southern Manchuria and exclusive control over Korea or, in other words, met all its war goals. However, the war was to have a decisive effect on the country's military, be it the IJN or the IJA, as numbers of their officers soon forgot that the country had trapped itself into an unsustainable conflict and got away with it mainly because of Russia's internal instability and the willingness of other powers to mediate in its favour. Instead, subsequent generations of officers would be convinced that they won against a more numerous enemy thanks to a combination of decisive battles and a supposedly inherently superior

Japanese fighting spirit. Several fruits of the 1905 victory were to prove highly poisonous indeed in the long run.⁶

Siberian Quagmire

Japan benefited immensely from the First World War, notably because it refused to dispatch a large contingent to Europe despite several requests from Great Britain. On the other hand, on 2 September 1914, the IJA's 18th Division landed on the Shantung Peninsula to lay siege – together with a small British force – to the German



With the siege of Port Arthur becoming a much tougher proposition than expected, the IJA had to move some heavy cannon initially dedicated to coastal defence in Japan proper. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

fortified harbour of Tsingtao, defended by nearly 5,000 soldiers and sailors. The hopelessly isolated German colonial outpost held for six weeks before surrendering, with the siege costing the Japanese 451 dead and 1,451 wounded. In the meantime, the IJN seized all the Pacific islands held by the Kaiser, namely the Marianas, Carolines and Marshalls. The national economy benefited immensely from the war as it suddenly found itself in a position to fill the void left in Asia by the mobilisation of their Western counterparts to support the war effort. This made possible a massive growth of the industrial sector, which doubled in size between 1914 and 1919.

However, Tokyo also overextended its hand by addressing its infamous 21 Demands to China, which would have transformed the nascent republic into a virtual semi-colony. This not only incensed the Chinese population, but also triggered firm opposition from other powers, primarily the USA, forcing Japan to withdraw its demands. Furthermore, the October 1917 Revolution in Russia also drew Japan into what proved to be a costly and fruitless endeavour. In November, a small detachment landed in Vladivostok to help the Tsarist authorities to restore order against the local Soviets. Before long, several high-ranking officers began to dream of exploiting the chaos then engulfing Russia by creating a Japanese-dominated buffer state encompassing the Russian Far East. However, the Japanese

Cabinet constrained their ardour and limited itself to deploying troops under the guise of an international force dispatched to the region nominally to rescue the Czech Legion, then withdrawing along the Trans-Siberian Railway. The entire 12th Division thus landed in Vladivostok on 18 August 1918, followed in its wake by the 7th Division as well as other units, until the Japanese contingent reached 70,000 – much more than the expected 12,000 men initially agreed on with the Allies.

Japanese forces then expanded northward until they reached the shores of Lake Baikal before gradually becoming embroiled in a vicious guerrilla war against local Soviet insurgents and protecting Japanese Zaibatsu henchmen which had rushed into the IJA-controlled areas to conduct business. However, the whole affair turned into a quagmire as the White Russians were losing both cohesiveness and their war against the Soviets. In 1920, the Czech Legion completed its withdrawal, and was followed in kind by the US and British contingents.

By then, the intervention in Siberia was opposed not only by London and Washington but also by large segments of the Japanese population. Indeed, supporting it was extremely costly – 42 percent of the national budget was dedicated to the Army in 1922 – but this was also taking place right in the middle of an economic downturn of massive proportions caused by the return to business of Western enterprises in the Asian markets once the First World War had ended. To add insult to the injury, it was becoming more and more obvious that the White Russians had no prospect of winning, or even stalemating, the war, leaving Tokyo with the prospect of either withdrawing or entering into an unsustainable full-scale war against the Soviet Union. As early as August 1920, the IJA began a slow and deliberate withdrawal until its last forces left Russia at the end of 1922. In total, 240,000 Japanese soldiers served in Siberia during these four years, whilst the IJA suffered from 12,000 casualties, largely caused by sicknesses and frostbite.⁷

Years of Peace

The Siberian expedition ended Japan's propensity to deploy forces abroad for several years. A weak, but real, consensus emerged among wide segments of the political class and the main Zaibatsu that Japan would be better off by giving up old-fashioned imperialism and embrace mutual cooperation, with the 1922 signing of the Washington Treaty being a high-mark of this new policy. In the meantime, the post-war economic downturn was followed by the

September 1923 Great Tokyo Earthquake which further enticed the government to reduce the weight of an unsustainable military budget. In the context, the Army lost part of its pre-eminence and had to reduce its peacetime order of battle from 21 to 17 divisions in May 1925. The only significant interventions abroad were the First and Second Shandong Expeditions in 1927 and 1928 respectively.

In the meantime, the widespread internationalist consensus which still dominated the Japanese political scene became more



British, Indian and Japanese soldiers posing together during the siege of Tsingtao in 1914. (Open source)



A depiction of Japanese troops entering the port of Vragaeschensk during the Siberian expedition. (Open source)

and more contested among ever larger segments of the Japanese population, whilst it had never been especially popular in either the Navy or Army officer corps. The country found itself on the receiving end of a financial crisis in 1927, caused by the fall of the Bank of Taiwan, soon followed by the aftershocks of the 1929 Great Crash, which caused a collapse of exports and together plunged large segments of the population into abject poverty and thus undermined the promises of international economic cooperation. In the meantime, the gradual re-emergence of a unified China with the Kuomintang looking well on the way to reunite the country

under its flag by taming one warlord after another, as well as the return of Russian power in the Far East under the guise of the now pacified and fast developing Soviet Union, made all the more threatening because communism was meeting with some sympathy in small segments of the Japanese working-class, all contributed to give further impetus to local ultra-nationalists whilst undermining the mainstream political class's legitimacy. In turn, this virtually guaranteed that the Japanese stance during the 1930s would prove much more aggressive than ever previously.⁸

1

GEKOKUJO

It is hardly surprising that radical nationalism in its various forms spread like a wildfire among the IJA officer corps during the 1920s. The Kodoha (Imperial Way) doctrine in particular easily gained influence among the institution if only because it was developed by an officer, Sadao Araki, who also founded in 1924 the Kokuhonsha (Society for the Foundation of the State) to promulgate his ideas, before in 1928 he became the head of the Army War College and thus found himself in a perfect position to distil the Kodoha concepts among the would-be young officers. Whilst sometimes compared to Fascist ideologies, the Imperial Way doctrine was also

typically Japanese as it fused parts of the Bushido teachings with an absolute obedience to the Emperor. The latter was expected to rule his empire directly as an absolute monarch. The country itself was to expand abroad whilst embracing virtue and morality by expelling the corrupting influences of Western ideologies such as democracy, communism, capitalism or socialism and thus return to "traditional" and uniquely Japanese virtues. This was also endorsed by Nichirenism, a nationalist and radical branch of Nichiren Buddhism. The growth of Kodoha doctrine in the officer corps did not occur without generating opposition, noticeably with the



Sadao Araki, founder of Kokuhonsha and a key figure of the Japanese military during the 1920s and 1930s. (Open source)



Even more radical than Sadao Araki was Lieutenant Colonel Hashimoto Kingoro, founder of the small but influential Cherry Society. (Open source)

emergence of the *Toseiha* (Control) school of thought which whilst sharing with its rival the certainty of a forthcoming war with the Soviet Union, advocated a more reformist stance and notably to develop the country's industries to prepare for a protracted total war. In the meantime, another officer, Lieutenant Colonel Hashimoto Kingoro, had taken an even more drastic step in October 1930 when he created the Sakurakai (Cherry Society) which soon included about a hundred mid-ranking staff college graduates dedicated to establishing a military dictatorship, by force if necessary.

Whilst the control faction eventually became dominant during the second half of the 1930s after a series of assassinations or failed coup d'état conducted by followers of the Imperial Way doctrine, the latter still proved heavily influential in shaping the worldview of numbers of IJA leaders. This was to have decisive consequences because of the rehabilitation of *Gekokujo* (rule of the higher by the

lower) a concept drawn from the Japanese Middle-Age, which also became widespread among the officer corps. Indeed, this concept dated from the Onin War at the end of the 15th century, when it became briefly acknowledged as legitimate to revolt against the exaction of ruthless feudal lords.

In the IJA's context, this meant that it became acceptable for junior officers to take the initiatives they deemed necessary without the approval or even knowledge of superior officers assessed by the former as lacking in judgement, will or moral courage, as long as their motives were sincere and serving what they thought was the greater good. In other words, numbers of captains, majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels, mostly well-trained and occupying staff positions, began to think that it was legitimate to act on their own if they were convinced that they "knew better" than civilian ministers, high-ranking officers or the Army General Staff (AGS).



An SMR train in the 1920s. (Open source)

To make matters even worse, the superiors in question often failed to punish appropriately such initiatives out of a reluctance to admit a loss of control or, more simply, because they had chosen from the outset to keep their eyes closed when it was possible to stop their subordinates' attempts. Indeed, the Army itself regularly chose to abstain from punishing this kind of insubordination out of fear of damaging its institutional credibility. Thus, young mavericks not only felt free to act as they liked for the greater Japanese good, even if this meant risking drawing the Empire into all-out war, but could be almost certain to get away with it. And indeed, both Kodoha and Gekokujo were to plunge Japan into a series of wars on the Asian continent because these became endemic among the Kwantung Army staff, a body perfectly positioned to meddle with Chinese affairs, with the Kwantung Army itself arguably becoming Gekokujo's very embodiment.¹

Kantogun

Following the war with Russia, the IJA maintained a sizeable garrison in the Liaodong Peninsula to protect it as well as the newly created Minami Manshu Tetsudo Kabushiki Kaisha (South Manchuria Railway Joint Stock Company; SMR) tasked with running the railways formerly owned by Moscow in southern Manchuria. The latter benefited from massive investment and soon proved a highly profitable venture. By 1907, the SMR controlled a total of 1,100 kilometres of tracks connecting 25 towns along two main lines; the Changchun to Dairen and Mukden to Antung railways. Crucially, the SMR ruled over 250 square kilometres with extraterritoriality rights whilst Japan was allowed to deploy a limited number of IJA troops in the SMR-controlled areas to protect these. The company itself acted as a vehicle for Japanese economic activities in a Manchuria well-endowed with natural resources. Indeed, by 1930, the area had become vital for the Japanese economy; it provided 64 percent of the Empire's coal imports and 46 percent of the cast iron imports besides massive quantities of timber, cotton, wool and various food supplies such as flour and soy. In the meantime, between 1926 and 1931, a staggering 70 percent of Japanese investments abroad went into Manchuria. Unsurprisingly, as many as 230,000 Japanese citizens lived in the Japanese-held areas in the Liaodong Peninsula and the SMR zones.

In 1919, Tokyo reshuffled the governance of its 3,400 square kilometres dominion over the Liaodong Peninsula – the so-called Kwantung Leased Territory – so far ensured by military officers, by splitting it between a governor in charge of civilian affairs and a military command. The latter answered directly to the Army General Staff and the War Minister in Tokyo, but was allowed to take instant military action without referring first to the General Staff if deemed necessary. In April that same year, the IJA activated a separate command, the Kantogun, better known as the Kwantung Army, to oversee units deployed in the peninsula and Manchuria. The Army remained a tiny affair until 1931 however, with a single division rotated from Japan every two years and garrisoned in the Liaodong Peninsula as well as an Independent Garrison Unit, tasked with protecting the SMR facilities in Manchuria, controlling six independent battalions, numbered from 1 to 6.² The Kwantung Army also controlled a miscellany of various other units, including a heavy artillery battalion, a military police detachment and several armoured trains.³

Demise of a Marshal

It did not take long before the Kwantung Army became embroiled in the than chaotic Chinese military-political scene. The fall of the



A trooper of the Fengtian Army showing his MP28 submachinegun. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



France proved an important weapon supplier for the Fengtian clique, providing its army with Bréguet 14 aircraft, FT-17 tanks and Hotchkiss machine guns as shown here. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The Fengtian Army was widely considered as one of the best equipped and organised among the warlords' armies, and often gained the upper hand during the campaigns opposing various cliques during the 1920s. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Qing Dynasty in 1911 was followed by years of turmoil during which a multitude of warlords, more or less strongly allied into several competing factions or cliques, emerged from the ruins of the defunct and deeply disunited Imperial Army and carved out



The Fengtian Army was comparatively lavishly equipped with field artillery in the Chinese context, noticeably because it could rely on the gigantic Mukden Arsenal that was able to produce several types of small arms and ammunition in large quantities. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Fengtian Army soldiers preparing to defend a position in the vicinity of Peking. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The remains of the wagon where Chang Tso-Lin was killed on 4 June 1928. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

their own dominions, thus splitting the country apart. Each clique competed with the others to reunite the country under its flag, thus triggering a series of major civil wars from 1920 to 1928 fought by a half-dozen entities such as the Anhwei, Chihli and Fengtien cliques or the KMT.

Early on, the Japanese had allied with Chang Tso-Lin, a Chinese former bandit and division commander and leader of the Fengtian clique which controlled the provinces of Kirin, Fengtien and Heilungkiang which together formed Manchuria. An astute politician and a reasonably efficient organiser, Chang Tso-Lin, soon to be dubbed the “Old Marshal”, managed to build a relatively strong army by harnessing the resources of his – in the Chinese context –



The “Old Marshal” Chang Tso-Lin in 1928, a few weeks before his death. (Open source)

rich dominion. In March 1922, the warlord marched toward Peking with five divisions and several brigades only to be ignominiously defeated by the forces of the rival Zhili clique and to be forced to retreat toward Manchuria. The Old Marshal proved undeterred and lost no time to rebuild his forces, raising their strength to around 200,000 men organised into the 1st, 27th and 29th Divisions, 27 mixed brigades and five cavalry brigades, all well equipped by Chinese standards thanks to the warlord’s control of the Mukden Arsenal and weapon imports from countries such as Japan, France and the USA. Notably, it included two companies of Renault FT-17 tanks and a small air force with several dozen Bréguet 14 light bombers. The Kwantung Army also became involved in the build-up and detached several officers to advise the Fengtian Army and help its staff plan the forthcoming campaign. In September 1924, the Old Marshal’s army crossed the Manchurian border again and soon became engaged together with several allies in a series of vicious battles with the Zhili Army before emerging victorious two months later, thanks to the betrayal of one of the main Zhili commanders. The triumph proved hollow however as a new war erupted the following year and this time, enfeebled by the defection of several of its commanders, Chang Tso-Lin was forced to withdraw again to Manchuria, before turning the tables against his foes again, partly thanks to a limited commitment of Kwantung Army troops, and entered Peking again in April 1926.

By waging this series of wars amongst themselves, the warlords of northern and central China had made themselves vulnerable to the fast-rising KMT, whose powerbase was in the south and had been led since 1925 by Chiang Kai-shek. The latter launched the bulk of the movement’s armed branch, the National Revolutionary Army, northward under the Northern Expedition in 1926. In less than two years, the National Revolutionary Army, which was sustained by important Soviet weapon deliveries, subdued or defeated the most powerful factions in northern China, once again forcing the Fengtian Army to withdraw toward Manchuria in the process. The Northern Expedition did however trigger a major Japanese



Chang Hsueh-liang succeeded his father and soon proved to be a staunch nationalist, to the dismay of the Japanese. He is posing here in 1930 with Chiang Kai-shek, the KMT supremo. (Open source)

military reaction with the First and Second Shandong Expeditions, in 1927 and 1928 respectively, when troops were dispatched to the Shandong Peninsula to nominally quell attacks against Japanese

residents. The second of these expeditions triggered a battle lasting several days in Jinan between the IJA's 6th Division and the National Revolutionary Army in early May 1928, in the course of which the Japanese soldiers killed several thousand Chinese soldiers and civilians, thus exacerbating further anti-Japanese feelings among the Chinese population at large.⁴

Indeed, this defeat of the Old Marshal incensed a number of Kwantung Army officers who deemed him unreliable, whilst he had already made the crucial mistake of allowing the building of new, Chinese-owned railways, able to compete with the SMR. Among these was senior Staff Officer Colonel Komoto Daisaku who decided to kill him and organised his assassination, expecting that his death would be attributed to Chinese rivals. Central to Komoto's plot was the hope that the Marshal's assassination would plunge Manchuria into chaos and thus provide a pretext for a Kwantung Army intervention. The hitmen succeeded in planting a bomb which detonated under Chang Tso-Lin's train on 4 June 1928, killing him and several other officers. The assassination however proved a blunder because the culprits were later identified, triggering in turn a major political scandal in Japan but the Colonel himself got away with it with a simple suspension from active duty. Crucially, the Old Marshal was succeeded by his son, Chang Hsueh-liang, dubbed the "Young Marshal" who, whilst a notorious opium addict, was also a skilled commander and politician and succeeded in establishing his authority over his father's former collaborators. Furthermore, Chang Hsueh-liang proved even less inclined to act as a Japanese puppet than his father had. Indeed, by year's end, he announced his allegiance to the KMT, which of course, was anathema for the Japanese. Indeed, it soon turned out that the Young Marshal was foremost a sincere nationalist and he began to take steps to reduce both Japanese and Soviet influences over Manchuria.⁵

Soviet Walkover

In 1929, the Young Marshal pressed the Soviet Union to return the Chinese Eastern Railway, that is the Russian-owned rail network located in Manchuria inherited from Tsarist times. In July 1929, his soldiers seized the company's infrastructure and arrested around 200

Soviet employees whilst large forces were concentrated on the Manchurian-Soviet border.

Moscow reacted by activating the Special Far Eastern Army on 7 August 1920 with Vasily Blyukher as its commander. The Army controlled the 21st, 35th and 36th Rifle Divisions, two cavalry brigades, the Amur Division of the Far Eastern Flotilla and several air squadrons and detachments, all badly understrength as these units had around 18,500 men between them.

On 12 October, the Special Far Eastern Army invaded Manchuria and took the town of Fukdin in early November after several days of heavy fighting. This was followed by Chailinor, where only 1,000 men of the



A group of RKKA – or Red Army – soldiers relaxing before continuing their advance during the 1929 war against China. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Three Soviet soldiers proudly showing captured Chinese flags. The Far Eastern Soviet Army easily defeated its more numerous opponents during the conflict, although Chinese resistance proved fiercer than expected. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

7,000 strong garrison managed to escape, and finally Manchouly where the Soviets took several thousand prisoners before continuing to advance along the railway line until 1 December 1929, when peace negotiations started. On 22 December, a Sino-Soviet agreement was signed where Chang Hsueh-liang returned the Chinese Eastern Railway to its previous owner, thus ending the war, with the Soviet forces withdrawing thereafter. Whilst vastly outnumbered, the much better armed, and more mobile Soviet units, including MS-1 tanks, easily defeated the Fengtian Army forces opposing them, suffering only 812 soldiers killed during the war. Their opponents reported the loss of 2,000 killed, whilst another 8,000 Chinese soldiers were taken prisoner.⁶

The Manchurian Incident

The short Sino-Soviet war raised alarms for the Japanese, as it made obvious that nothing could prevent Moscow from seizing Manchuria and thus jeopardise their economic interests there. However, Tokyo was not the least eager to launch a military intervention but as it turned out, several IJA officers had already decided to solve the problem in their own fashion. Namely, in October 1928 Lieutenant Colonel Ishiware Kanji, a brilliant planner and tactician and also an ardent devotee of Nichirenism was assigned a staff position in the Kwantung Army and was soon re-joined by Lieutenant Colonel Itagaki Seishiro, another fire-eater and also renowned as a natural leader. The pair, obviously encouraged by the defeat of the Fengtian Army at the hand of a much smaller enemy, began to plan for an outright invasion of Manchuria, patiently building a web of supporters not only in the Kwantung Army, but also the Chosengun (Korea Army), and of course in Japan proper. Spies were even sent into Chinese territory to gather intelligence about local garrisons, although the Chinese captured one of these, a Japanese captain, and executed him. The plotters proved especially lucky however when in August 1931, a new CO of the Kwantung Army arrived. Indeed, General Honjo Shigeru proved not only enthusiastic once he learned about their project, but outright supportive. With this, an IJA major command was readying itself to invade another nation without requesting the approval or even informing beforehand not only their government but also their own military superiors. By

mid-1931, the plotters were ready to act.

In appearance, the projected invasion was a daunting task not only because of the sheer size of Manchuria but also because according to the IJA's own intelligence, Chang Hsueh-liang could count on 250,000 regular soldiers organised in 33 infantry brigades and 10 cavalry brigades, as well as nine artillery regiments and a fleet of around a hundred aircraft all constituting the North-Eastern Frontier Defence Army, formerly part of the KMT forces.

Fortunately for the Japanese, roughly half of these forces were deployed outside Manchuria, with the bulk being concentrated around

Peking, but there were still an estimated 140,000 men and 216 guns available to defend Manchuria. The Chinese warlord was also assessed to control another 80,000 irregulars of dubious military value. In any case, the North-Eastern Frontier Defence Army was united only in name as it was in essence a coalition of units owned by their own warlords, among which Chang Hsueh-liang was only the most powerful.

To face this disparate force, the Kwantung Army could initially rely on the 4,000 soldiers of the six Independent Garrison Battalions, each with four infantry companies, scattered around the SMR facilities in Manchuria, as well as on the 2nd Division, which had arrived in the Kwantung Leased Territory in April 1931 to replace the departing 14th Division. The division's real strength was however far below what its order of battle might have suggested because it was not only at peacetime strength but also because a third of its men remained in Japan where they were needed to conduct other duties. Thus, the 2nd Division's two brigades, four infantry regiments and other support units totalled a mere 4,350 men between them. On the other hand, the division had an excellent reputation inherited from the previous wars, and was nicknamed "The Courageous". Altogether, the Kwantung Army could thus rely on a grand total of 10,400 men.

Lieutenant Colonel Ishiware Kanji, who drew up the campaign plans, thus gambled on a series of night actions and fast-running operations to unsettle the Chinese forces. The crucial part of the whole undertaking was a surprise night assault on the enemy nerve centre, Mukden, where Chang Hsueh-liang's army HQ was located, even though Japanese intelligence estimated that the town was defended by at least 14,000 soldiers and 40 guns, including the elite 7th Independent Brigade. Ishiware was confident that once the enemy centre of gravity was destroyed, all other Chinese forces would prove unable to mount a cohesive resistance swiftly enough whilst fast-moving Japanese units were using the SMR railway to take one objective after another, sowing even more confusion. Of course, Ishiware, Itagaki and Honjo were also confident that, once the invasion had started, the AGS would have no choice but to dispatch reinforcements from Japan whilst the Korea Army was willing to do the same on its own initiative.

The die was cast during the night of 18 September 1931 when the plotters conducted a classic false flag operation during which a party of Kwantung Army soldiers blew up a small section of rail of the SMR on the outskirts of Mukden, thus providing the Japanese with the pretext they needed to launch the invasion.⁷

Railway Blitzkrieg

Indeed, the Kwantung Army troops launched their attacks in the hours that followed the provocation. During the night, the 2nd Independent Garrison Battalion, supported by a pair of 150mm howitzers smuggled disassembled by the Japanese into the town beforehand, assaulted the Mukden Barracks, taking the 7th Independent Brigade soldiers unprepared and further confused by an instruction from Marshal Chang Hsueh-liang to all of his forces to not resist. Thus, by the end of 19 September, the garrison battalion, reinforced early in the day by the 29th Regiment of the 2nd Division, had completed the conquest of Mukden, losing a mere 9 dead and 42 wounded in the process. Crucially, the Japanese captured the local airfield, and the bulk of Chang Hsueh-liang's air-fleet of around 60 aircraft, intact. These were immediately repainted in Japanese colours and some were pressed into service and – ironically – flown by a group of Japanese pilots formerly attached to the Chinese as instructors. These were soon reinforced by units of the Imperial Japanese Army Air Corps (Rikugun Kokku Butai) including a fighter squadron, the 10th Independent Flying Chutai. That same day, the 1st Independent Garrison Battalion, supported by elements of the 2nd Division, seized the town of Changchun. There, the Chinese resistance proved more determined with the two units losing a total of 66 soldiers killed and another 79 wounded. On 22 September, it was the turn of Jilin to fall after an assault by another regiment of the 2nd Division which did not meet any resistance. So far, Ishiwaras carefully planned "Railway Blitzkrieg" had functioned flawlessly, with armoured trains playing a crucial role. They not only carried troops swiftly from one big city to the next but also constantly patrolled the SMR network, engaging or reporting Chinese concentrations which were then targeted by air raids and forced to scatter as a result.

On 21 September, the overstretched Kwantung Army received reinforcements in the form of a mixed brigade (two infantry regiments, an almost full divisional artillery complement and other support units) drawn from the Korea Army's 19th Division. Incredibly, the CO of the Korea Army had dispatched the brigade despite orders from the AGS to refrain from doing so. Indeed, the invasion stunned the Tokyo headquarters, which initially refused to dispatch reinforcements to the Kwantung Army and thus forced the latter to stop its advances. However, the die had been cast and both the AGS and the government finally resigned themselves to follow the lead of their forces in mainland Asia, with the Kwantung Army never ceasing to deliberately escalate its actions on the pretext of merely responding to new Chinese provocations whilst doing so. On 8 October, 12 aircraft bombed and strafed the town of Jinzhou, killing 16 residents including a German national. Thereafter, on 19 November, a Kwantung Army detachment took the town of



20th Division troops advancing in the plains of Manchuria in early 1932. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Ishiwaras Kanji in 1934, after his promotion to the rank of Colonel. (Open source)

Qiqhaer, capital of the province of Heilongjiang, after two weeks of fierce fighting in the freezing cold, as general Ma Zhanshan, the local Chinese commander, proved determined to resist. At first, he defeated a force of Chinese troops which had allied to the Japanese and blew up the railway bridge crossing the Nonni river. The Japanese sent a repair party escorted by an infantry regiment, but the Chinese cavalry managed to block its advance. This in turn forced the Kwantung Army to concentrate the roughly 4,000 men of the 2nd Division as well as an independent tank company and to send it toward Qiqhaer, where it was welcomed on 17 November by an – easily repulsed – general counterattack by Ma Zhanshan's forces. The following day, the division assaulted the Chinese defensive line protecting the city, breached it and invested Qiqhaer the same day, but at a heavy cost. Not only were 104 soldiers killed in the battle but another 300 died from exposure to the freezing cold. Another 800 men were wounded in action or suffered from frostbite. The battle's hellish conditions were described by Ishikawa Tadayuki, a press reporter embedded with the Japanese troops:

Bullets were flying, and nobody knew if they were coming from the enemy or our side. Soldiers began to dig desperately in the frozen soil. They were frozen to the bone and had difficulty in handling their shovels. [...] Later on, when the order to advance was given, the regiment, haggard and in a state of trance, rose and walked like a single man toward death, toward the position that the enemy was fiercely defending. From time to time, the order "Lie Down" would sound in the middle of the steppe, and the soldiers would lie down in the middle of the firefight and then they would get up and resume their advance; they would get up and move forward constantly. Everything seemed unreal, like in a dream. We didn't know who was hit, who was dead and who was alive.⁸



An LMG team of the 2nd Independent Garrison Battalion in the streets of Mukden. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

In early December 1931 at last, two new mixed brigades had arrived in Manchuria from Japan, together with an independent tank company equipped with Renault FT-17 and NC-27 tanks, and these were followed by the entire 20th Division dispatched from Korea. This influx of forces allowed the Japanese to relieve the exhausted 2nd Division and to take Jinzhou on 3 January 1932 and finally Harbin on 5 February, with the capture of the whole of Manchuria proper being completed a few weeks thereafter. The conquest was anything from secure as tens of thousands of former North-Eastern Frontier Defence Army soldiers had scattered into

the countryside and turned into bandits, thus massively expanding a problem already endemic for decades.

In hindsight, the Kwantung Army's success in conquering a territory equal to France and Germany combined against numerically vastly superior forces looks almost miraculous. Indeed, the IJA soldiers' superior training and their use of shock tactics are far from enough to explain this. As it turned out, the root cause of the Chinese debacle lay in Chiang Kai-shek gambling on repelling the Japanese through diplomatic means. Accordingly, early on during the incident he ordered the North-Eastern Frontier Defence Army to not resist the Japanese and to withdraw instead into northern China, thus easing the task of the advancing Japanese



Potez 25 aircraft captured at Mukden airfield. Before long, several of these were used against their former owners. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

flying columns by an order of magnitude. Indeed, the KMT supremo had hoped that by doing so, the Japanese would undoubtedly appear as the naked aggressors and that this would entice the League of Nations to pressure Tokyo into withdrawing its troops. However, the gamble did not pay off: Chinese appeals to the League were in vain with the only tangible result being the dispatch to Manchuria of a fact-finding mission, the Lytton Commission. Whilst the commission's report finally concluded that Japan was the aggressor, with the Empire of the Rising Sun withdrawing from the League as a result, Manchuria remained firmly in Japanese hands thereafter.⁹ In the IJA, the adepts of Gekokujo had triumphed against all odds, causing the fall of a government cabinet in the process, and there was no lack of officers dreaming of emulating Lieutenant Colonel Ishiwaru Kanji, who ironically, was subsequently promoted to a staff position in the AGS where he would later complain about similar ill-advised initiatives from Kwantung Army officers.

The Shanghai bloodbath

Another case of Gekokujo, even more disastrous for Japanese international credibility, came as a side-effect of the Mukden incident. In October 1931, Colonel Itagaki Sheishiro ordered Major Tanaka Ryukichi, then an assistant military attaché at the Japanese Shanghai consulate, to foment incidents in order to distract international attention from the ongoing invasion of Manchuria. The major proved zealous and eventually convinced five Japanese followers of the Nichiren cult to march into a popular Chinese factory area. These did so on 18 January 1932, attracting the ire of Chinese workers by psalmoding sutras, until several of them attacked the monks, killing one.

Then, Major Tanaka enticed around 50 members of the local branch of the Seinendan (Youth League) to avenge the murdered monk and these set fire to the factory that the Chinese workers had come from, before exchanging pistol fire with Chinese policemen who had rushed to the scene, in the course of which one policeman and one Japanese militant died. This proved more than enough to ignite already widespread anti-Japanese feelings among the Chinese population and before long large-scale riots were taking place in the city.



IJA soldiers in the outskirts of Shanghai in 1932, manning a Type 11 LMG. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

In turn, the IJN reacted by initiating what it foresaw as a mere show of force to intimidate the Chinese and thus protect the 25,000 strong Japanese community living in Shanghai. Accordingly, several warships of the 3rd Fleet moored near the town, soon supported from the high sea by the 1st Koku Sentai (Air Flotilla) centred around the aircraft carriers *Hosho* and *Kaga* and their complement of 26 fighters and 41 torpedo bombers. On 28 January 1932, the nearly 2,000 strong Shanghai Special Naval Landing Force landed in Shanghai. This was a naval infantry detachment centred around four reinforced infantry companies – with 21 rifle platoons and three MG platoons between them – supported by a tank and armoured car company and an artillery platoon. That same night, several floatplanes overflew the town and dropped flares to further intimidate the Chinese.

At first, it appeared as though everything was going according to plan with the naval riflemen advancing from the seafront into the city streets without meeting any organised resistance. However, before long, the SNLF began to be engaged in fierce fighting with the NRA's 78th Division. The latter unit, together with the 60th and 61st Divisions, was part of the 19th Route Army, a well-trained and battle-hardened force which had arrived in Shanghai a few days earlier.



Two Renault NC-27 Tanks of the 2nd Independent Tank Company engaged in the 1932 Shanghai Incident. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

and had established a series of well-designed strongpoints and field fortifications both in and around the town. Whilst the naval infantry could rely on the fire support of the warships moored on the Huangpu River, it soon became obvious that the IJN had bitten off more than it could chew. Accordingly, requests for reinforcements were addressed to the IJA. On 5 February, the Army 24th Mixed Brigade disembarked in the city and was followed on 14 February by the 9th Division. However, this proved insufficient as the Japanese engaged in a series of unsuccessful and costly assaults against enemy positions in and around the town, especially as the Chinese in turn threw into



SNLF naval riflemen manning a barricade in downtown Shanghai. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

the battle the crack 5th Route Army, whose 87th and 88th Divisions joined the fray in mid-February. After several weeks of fierce fighting, the Japanese at last broke the deadlock by landing the 11th and 14th Divisions on the banks of the Yangtze river north of the city and behind the enemy rear from 28 February on. On 1 March 1932, the IJA launched a general offensive on all fronts and both Chinese armies began a deliberate and well-planned withdrawal as a result, thus escaping the would-be encirclement. A ceasefire came into effect a few days later, closing what the Japanese called the "Shanghai Incident". The Japanese admitted the loss of 718 soldiers killed and another 1,788 wounded during the fighting whilst at least 4,000 Chinese soldiers reportedly lost their lives. Both sides however refrained from escalating the fighting into an all-out war, thanks to the intervention of Emperor Hirohito who forbade the IJA and IJN to expand the conflict. Chiang Kai-shek did the same because China did not have the means to engage in full-scale war, whilst he knew that the relative defeat of his forces counted for little against the major political victory gained against Tokyo.

Indeed, the incident proved nothing less than a disaster for Japan. The Chinese had already initiated a boycott against Japanese products even before the Shanghai Incident, but the latter unsurprisingly strengthened by an order of magnitude the Chinese populations' will to follow it. As a result, Japanese exports to China – by far Tokyo's prime export market – fell by 90 percent in 1932. Furthermore, the fighting took place right under the eyes of the international community as most of the major powers of the time held a concession in Shanghai, thus making it easy for their media to witness Japanese exactions against civilian populations, beginning of course with the shelling and bombing of urban areas as well as the flow of around half-a-million refugees who had to flee the city, and thus devastate the image of Japan. This of course played heavily on 24 February 1933 when the League of Nations voted in favour of designating Japan as an aggressor in the Manchurian affair and demanded accordingly a Japanese withdrawal from the three Chinese provinces. The Japanese withdrew from the League instead, with the latter failing to take any significant sanctions, thus paving the way for further violations of international law by other countries.

As such, the Shanghai Incident proved instrumental, among other things, in placing the Empire on a collision course with the USA.¹⁰

The ruckus in Geneva did not in the least deter the Kwantung Army from further expanding its dominion into Inner Mongolia, conquering the province of Jehol between March and May 1933, this time with the Emperor's blessing, although he restrained his military from advancing beyond the Great Wall. The IJA 8th Division's advance, supported by a tank company and four armoured trains, met only with limited resistance from the ill-equipped 4th, 5th and 6th Army Groups, nominally under KMT command but in reality controlled by General Tang Yu-lin, the local warlord and military governor of the province. The KMT backed down and even agreed to withdraw its forces further from the Japanese line of control thus creating a demilitarised zone covering Hopeh province.¹¹

From Utopia to enslavement

From Lieutenant Colonel Ishiwa Kanji's perspective, a Japanese-inspired and led Manchuria was to provide the Empire of the Rising Sun with the resources it needed to prepare itself to wage a global war where it was to lead the Asian race against the West, whilst the new country was also to embody a new era by creating a new society of harmony, justice and virtue, devoid of greedy capitalism and corruption, for all the Manchus, Mongols, Chinese, Japanese, Russians and Koreans living on its soil. According to him, Japan was even to give the SMR to the new state as a token of its benevolence. It soon turned out, however – and rather unsurprisingly – that these dreams were to remain just dreams and reality turned into something entirely different.¹²

Indeed, the Kwantung Army rushed into creating an independent state virtually out of the blue almost as soon as the invasion was completed. A declaration of independence took place on 18 February 1932. The new country was baptised Manchukuo (Manchu Land) and Changchun was selected as its capital. Although it was initially a republic, the Japanese chose Henry Pu Yi, the last Chinese emperor, as head of state, although they changed tack two years later with Manchukuo becoming a monarchy in 1935 with Pu Yi as its emperor. In the meantime, a local administration and army were put into place. However, all of this was largely a pretence with Pu



French advertising poster for the South Manchurian Railways. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Yi remaining a figurehead. All the major decisions were made by the Kwantung Army whilst in any case almost all of the important positions in the state apparatus were held by Japanese. Unsurprisingly, Manchukuo became a repressive state targeting in particular the Han population which was corseted by a resurrection of the ancient *baojia* system but associated with collective responsibility; all the members of a cell being held responsible if one member was found guilty of misconduct. To finance all of that, as well as the Kwantung

Army presence, the state relied mostly on customs revenues and a series of taxes on products such as salt and opium. The revenues of the latter were noticeably one of the main sources of income but at a price; the country counted as many as half-a-million opium addicts during the 1930s. Furthermore, a series of monopolies, each with one third owned by the state, another by the SMR and the last by private stakeholders, came into being.

The Japanese government and big corporations invested massively in the country, with an emphasis on transport and energy infrastructure, heavy industries and mining. The former invested thus at least 100,000,000 Yen per year and this provided staggering results with 2,650 miles of new railroads built in a decade, adding to the 3,600 miles in existence in 1931. In the meantime, power generation increased by 900 percent. Coal and iron ore extraction rose from 8,950,000 to 13,800,000 tons and 673,000 to 1,325,000 tons respectively from 1931 to 1936. Thus, far from being a colonial backwater, Manchukuo was transformed into a vital part of Japan's economy as a whole, and its war industry in particular.¹³

Coups and Assassinations

Meanwhile, radicalisation and factionalism among the IJA officer corps was also getting out of control in Japan. The rivalry between the Imperial Way and Control factions culminated on 12 August 1935 when Lieutenant Colonel Aizawa Saburo, an Imperial Way sympathiser, hacked to death General Nagata Tetsuzan, the figurehead of the Control faction, with his sword. In turn, his trial contributed to a mutiny of elements of the 1st Division organised and led by two dozen junior officers. During the night from 25 to 26 February 1936, 1,400 men invested the centre of Tokyo, seized a series of official buildings and assassinated several Ministers and Imperial Household senior advisers. However, this incensed the Emperor who, for once, took a clear and firm stance against the putschists whilst other Army units surrounded them.

After four days of stand-off during which the IJA was on the verge of engaging in war against itself, the mutineers surrendered. This incident, latter known as "2-26" marked a drastic change of the Control faction's fortunes. Not only were 13 of the officers involved in the coup executed after an expedited trial, but the whole Army high command was purged of notorious sympathisers of the Imperial Way faction. However, military radicalism had by then devastated the Japanese political landscape; between 1930 and 1935, four major political assassinations including those of two prime ministers, and



A group of mutineers of the IJA 1st Division in the heart of Tokyo during the "2-26" Incident. (Open source)

three attempted coups d'état, all uncovered before they were initiated, had taken place. This placed under pressure the whole political class. Civilian cabinets proved increasingly unable to control the military whilst several political parties emulated their discourse and increasingly supported radical nationalism. Gradually, Japan was transforming itself into an aggressive and partly-totalitarian state whose leaders were either part of or influenced by a complex coalition of

staunch ultra-nationalists even though its main institutions remained in appearance unscathed.¹⁴

A Bridge Too Far

Gekokujo continued to run rampant in the field too. Tanaka Ryukichi, now a Lieutenant Colonel occupying an intelligence officer position on the staff of the Kwantung Army dedicated himself to helping Prince Teh Wang, a Mongol nobleman, to build his own army, at the head of which he was supposed to carve himself a kingdom over Inner Mongolia. Of course, from the Kwantung Army's perspective, this was to end in the coming into being of a new puppet state similar to Manchukuo. By mid-1936, the prince's force had reached 6,500 men, well-armed with Chinese weapons captured by the Japanese in 1931, but ill-trained and ill-motivated. Nonetheless, in October of the same year, Prince Teh led his small army, advised by a small group of Japanese officers and supported by a detachment of Japanese aircraft, into Suiyuan province. The venture, however, turned into a debacle as the KMT rushed reinforcements into the province and launched counterattacks on 18 November and 3 December, which ended with the Japanese-supported insurgents fleeing from the Nationalist troops. In the aftermath of the second of these clashes, some Inner Mongolians even turned against their Japanese advisers, killing several of these. Unsurprisingly, by January 1937, the last insurgents had withdrawn into Manchuria thus closing the Suiyuan incident with a clear-cut Chinese victory. Indeed, Chinese troops had managed to capture an insurgent headquarters and seize documents proving Japanese involvement in the affair.

Another incident a few months later was to have much more grievous consequences. Indeed, by the end of 1936, Chiang Kai-shek had been forced by the incensed public opinion, as well as number of hierarchs of his regime, to take a firmer stance against the repeated Japanese infringements of Chinese territory. This went as far as the Young Marshal kidnapping the KMT supremo, who released him only against a commitment to seek an alliance with the communists and thus create a united front to resist the Japanese. Whilst aware that the Nationalist Revolutionary Army was still far from ready to wage an all-out war against Tokyo, Chiang Kai-shek still ordered his troops to resist any IJA attempt to gain further ground in northern China. Crucially, these changes remained largely unnoticed by the Japanese in general and the Kwantung Army staff officers in particular, with all continuing to believe that the KMT could continue to be bullied into new concessions. This, of course, set the stage for an uncontrolled escalation of any new incident.

It was precisely such an event that occurred on the evening of 7 July 1937 when a soldier of IJA China Garrison's 1st Regiment went missing whilst his unit was conducting field manoeuvres in the vicinity of the Marco Polo Bridge. Once informed about the soldier's disappearance, Colonel Mutaguchi Renya, the 1st Regiment's commander and a notorious fire-eater, immediately launched a search in the neighbourhood and before long, his soldiers had engaged in a series of firefights with troops from the Chinese 29th Army, and these continued sporadically during the next few days, until 11 July, when diplomats from both sides succeeded in promulgating a ceasefire. The missing soldier reappeared a few hours after his disappearance.

However, in Tokyo, intensive talks involving the Emperor, the AGS, the War Ministry and the cabinet ended with a decision, despite AGS opposition, to initiate an offensive in northern China to cow the KMT. At this stage, it was expected that the involvement of three IJA divisions for three months would be more than enough

to achieve the desired results. Accordingly, Japanese troops of the China Garrison Army went on the offensive and easily captured Peking on 28 July and Tientsin two days later. However, and to the surprise of the Japanese, the KMT reacted by proclaiming a war of resistance the following day, thus crossing the Rubicon.¹⁵

Red Sun against White Sun

As it soon turned out, the NRA was far from ready to fight its Japanese counterpart head-on, with the Japanese almost routinely beating the Chinese during frontal engagements, even if usually greatly outnumbered. According to Chiang Kai-shek himself during a speech to his top officers in November 1937:

By the time of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, we were in a better domestic situation and achieved a better state of military preparedness than we had before then. Since 1935, our strength had doubled. It increased by more than two or three times since January 1932 or September 1931...if peace had been possible, we should have delayed the war for two or three years. With an additional three years, our defence capability would certainly have been drastically different.¹⁶

In early 1937, the Nationalist order of battle was especially impressive with a staggering 182 infantry divisions, 9 cavalry divisions, 46 independent infantry brigades, six independent cavalry brigades, four artillery brigades and 20 independent artillery regiments, with at least two million troops between them. Its flaws were equally daunting, however. There was no united army, but a central core directly controlled by the KMT associated with an array of allied or rallied regional armies and forces of varying standards and efficiency, whose soldiers' loyalties went to their respective warlords. Indeed, the central core itself amounted only to 71 infantry divisions, one cavalry division and 10 independent infantry brigades, for a total of roughly 900,000 troops. But even this core of loyalist troops was anything but homogeneous. Indeed, from the early 1920s on, the NRA had benefited from the presence of small numbers of Soviet and then German advisers. The number of the latter reached 61 in 1933 and 70 in 1935 and were led by General Hans von Seeckt from 1933 on and by General Alexander von Falkhausen from 1936 on. The small Deutsche Beraterschaft in China proved instrumental in helping the Chinese to retrain 19 divisions to German standards, as well as around 15,000 officers, whilst in the meantime, the country was importing comparatively large shipments of German weapons through the Handelsgesellschaft zur Verwertung industrieller Produkte which had been set up for the purpose. However, the Berlin connection proved insufficient to provide what was needed, if only because the KMT lacked the funds necessary to acquire enough equipment. Of the 19 "German" divisions, only eight had achieved their full training curriculum, whilst only seven had their full organic artillery battalion.

Chinese forces thus remained plagued by an endemic lack of firepower, with a single IJA division carrying in practice the firepower of at least an entire Chinese corps. To make matters worse, the NRA was equipped with an almost endless variety of weapons, bought in countries such as Germany, Italy, France, the USA, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Switzerland or Sweden, in comparatively small batches, thus creating what could only be described as a logistical nightmare. Whilst the Nanjing government had invested heavily into developing a local defence industry, even the latter produced a wide array of distinct firearms, thus aggravating instead of alleviating the issue. Army organisation was chaotic too, with

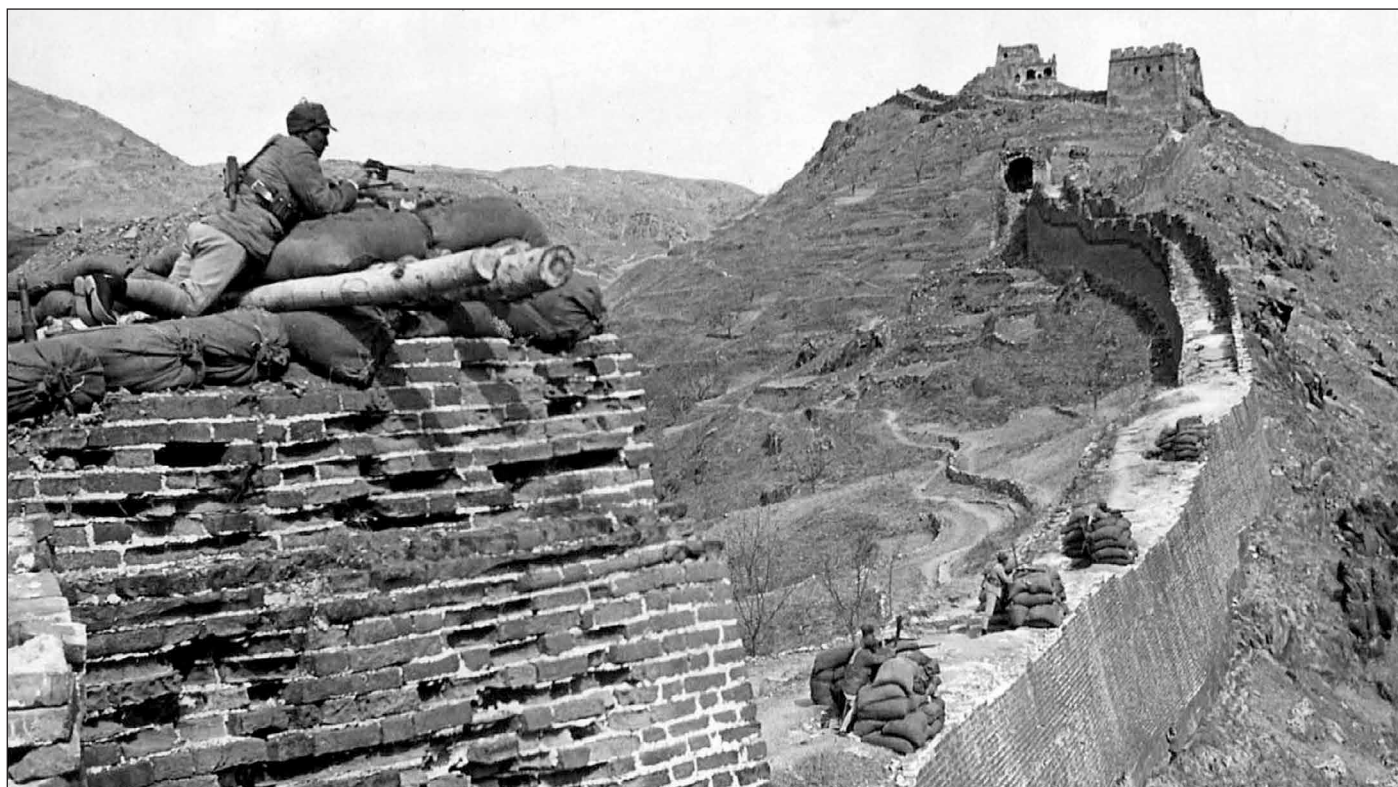
even the NRA core divisions being organised along five different patterns whilst, of course, each warlord force had its own standards of organisation and equipment. Furthermore, Chinese units were in any case seldom anywhere near their nominal strength. There was an endemic lack of trained NCOs and officers, with the various schools' outputs far from corresponding to the needs; 29.1 percent of even pre-war officers were directly promoted from the field and lacked formal military education. Unsurprisingly, the KMT nourished no illusion about defeating the Japanese outright but, to the contrary, planned for a protracted war intending to gradually wear the IJA down by waging a series of attrition battles.¹⁷ The KMT supremo emphasised that "the longer the war drags on, the more advantageous for China".¹⁸

Fall of Shanghai and Nanking

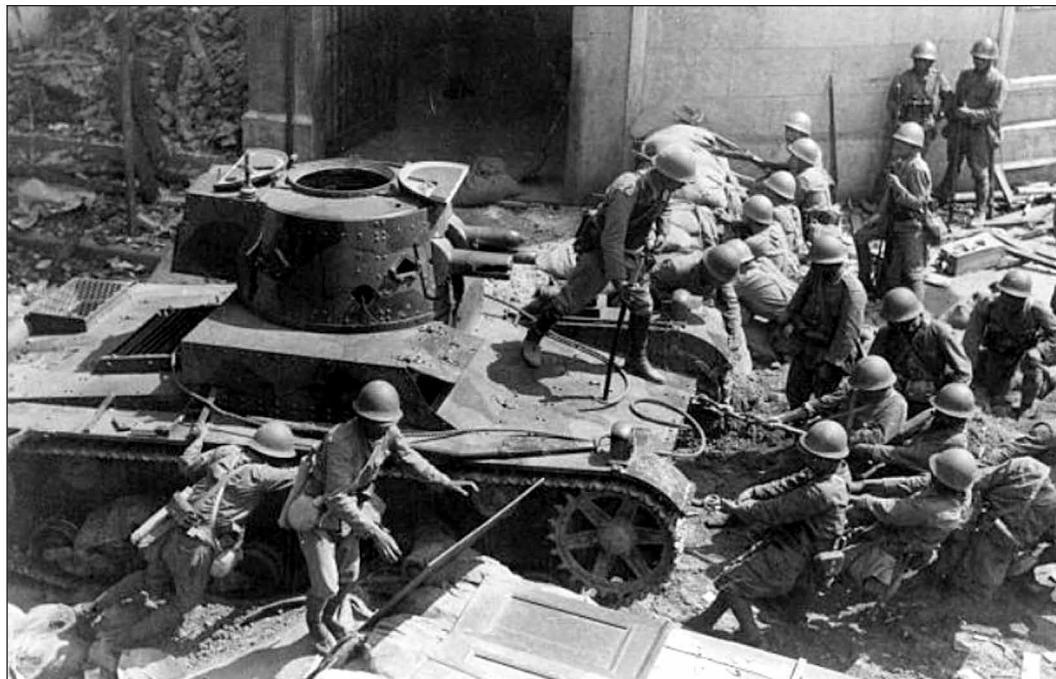
At the end of August 1937, the IJA rebaptised the fast-expanding China Garrison Army into the Northern China Area Army. Meanwhile, this command oversaw the advance of three main prongs following the three main railways going from north to the north-west and the south. Repeatedly outmanoeuvring and defeating the Chinese armies opposing them, the Japanese forces reached all of their objectives by late



Nationalist soldiers manning a Pak-36 (Panzerabwehrkanone) AT gun. Such guns could make short work of any armour in IJA service at the time, but there were far too few on hand. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Chinese soldiers occupying almost hopeless defensive positions on the Great Wall in northern China. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Japanese soldiers attempting to pull an abandoned Nationalist Vickers 6-Ton Tank in the streets of Nanking. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



One major asset of the Japanese during the "China Incident" was air superiority. Both the IJAAF and the IJNAF not only routinely attacked enemy airfields, cities and lines of communication, but provided support to their ground forces. Shown here is a Navy Yokosuka Type 92 (B3Y1) bomber. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

October. Whilst a demonstration of almost complete operational and tactical superiority, this campaign revealed several IJA flaws. In September, the 1st Army, which was advancing with three divisions along the Peking-Hankou railway broke through the defensive positions of three Chinese army groups totalling 22 divisions by outflanking these one after the other, and took the town of Baoding on 24 September. However, once the town was taken, the Japanese troops committed an orgy of murder and rape which was to become virtually a trademark of IJA brutality during the following months and years – and thus guarantee the hostility of local populations. Furthermore, Japanese supremacy was anything but total or guaranteed. Almost simultaneously, the 21st Brigade of the 5th Division, which was advancing through the Pinghsingkuan Pass in

Inner Mongolia was stopped in its tracks by the NRA's 71st and 73rd Divisions. On 25 September, the brigade supply train with 70 horse-drawn carts and 80 trucks was ambushed whilst advancing through the pass by the Communist 115th Division, which destroyed it almost entirely. Whilst only around 200 Japanese soldiers were killed during the affair, this provided the Chinese, who claimed to have killed 3,000 enemy soldiers, a much-needed propaganda boost and furthermore highlighted the potential of large-scale guerrilla warfare in China's fastnesses. Furthermore, the entire 5th Brigade itself had been badly battered in the battle and was saved only by the arrival of a relief force on 28 September.¹⁹

The KMT however wrongfooted the Japanese by opening a new front in Shanghai thus escalating the war. After a series of incidents, the NRA launched an all-out assault against the Japanese-held enclaves in the town with its 36th, 55th, 56th, 57th, 87th and 88th Divisions. However, the SNLF detachments located in the city offered determined resistance and before long, both sides rushed reinforcements to fuel the furnace, with the frontline expanding until it blocked not only the metropolis itself but also the entire countryside from the Yangtze River to Hangzhou Bay. By 6 September, the 8th, 9th and 15th Army Groups of the NRA, with 25 divisions, were holding the line and they were further

reinforced during the following weeks to the point of reaching half-a-million men. Similarly, and with the gradual arrival of the 3rd, 9th, 11th, 13th and 101st Divisions, the IJA Shanghai Expeditionary Force reached around 200,000 men, with both sides engaged in a vicious attritional battle and with the Japanese failing to break through despite a series of fierce general assaults. In the end, it was the landing of the IJA's 10th Army (6th, 18th and 118th Divisions) on the southern shore of Hangzhou Bay and behind the NRA main defence lines on 5 November 1937 that allowed the Japanese to break the stalemate, forcing the Chinese into a hasty withdrawal which turned into a rout. Whilst the KMT had succeeded into attracting the IJA into a quagmire on a ground of its own choosing, inflicting upon the later an unforeseen level of casualties with a total of 11,000



Things did not always go the Japanese way, as illustrated by these Chinese soldiers guarding captured IJA weapons, including five Type 11 LMGs and several dozen Type 38 rifles. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

killed and 31,000 wounded, it did so at an unaffordable cost. The very core of the NRA was decimated in the affair with an estimated 187,000 casualties. Whilst the best “new model” divisions were bled dry, the battle took a dramatic toll on the Chinese officer corps too; it lost 10,000 out of the 25,000 officers trained at the Central Military Academy up to 1937.

Therefore, the Shanghai Expeditionary Army and the 10th Army, soon to be united into the Central China Area Army, easily broke through the two successive defence lines hastily created to defend Nanking. Ironically and in another case of Gekokujo, their commanding officers had decided to advance toward the Nationalist capital without seeking approval from Tokyo. The IJA began to invest the town on 12 December and captured it after two days of fighting whilst massive numbers of Chinese soldiers were taken captive. This proved to be the opening stage of the infamous Rape of Nanking; during the following six weeks, the Japanese went on a rampage, mass-executing at least 200,000 people, half of them prisoners and half of them civilians, whilst committing tens of thousands of rapes.²⁰

The Campaigns for Hsueh and Wuhan

The fall of Nanking did not in the least deter the KMT from continuing its resistance, with the government withdrawing to Wuhan, a conurbation including the cities of Hankow, Hanyang and Wuchang. The IJA decided to launch a new, even more massive, campaign in an attempt to win a decisive victory by encircling and annihilating the KMT's 5th War Zone forces defending Hsueh. In March 1938, seven divisions from the North China Area Army and the Central China Expeditionary Army launched a multi-pronged operation against the latter city intending to encircle an estimated 50 Nationalist divisions in a pocket around Hsueh. The Japanese divisions, usually moving separately, advanced relentlessly during the following weeks despite the often-fierce resistance offered by the Chinese forces, usually overcoming it through a combination of flank manoeuvre and superior firepower. However, things did not always go the Japanese way; the Chinese deliberately allowed the IJA 5th Division to advance unopposed to Taierzhuang. Once it

entered the town, the Japanese division found itself embroiled in protracted street fighting against the NRA's 31st Division, which was defending the city. Meanwhile, other NRA divisions manoeuvred around Taierzhuang in an attempt to surround the enemy force. Thus, from 24 March to 7 April, the 5th Division fought to escape from the trap with the help of the 10th Division which was rushed to the scene, thus allowing the battered division to retreat. This proved only a temporary setback and the Japanese divisions continued their advance toward Hsueh, which fell on 19 May. However, the KMT had ordered a withdrawal a few days earlier and the bulk of the 5th War Zone's forces escaped the would-be Japanese cauldron in

good order, although the defence of Hsueh cost them roughly 100,000 casualties. In the meantime, the Japanese had also launched an advance towards Wuhan, with the 14th Division crossing the Yellow River on 14 May and seizing Kaifang on 6 June 1938. This was stopped by a drastic Chinese measure, however, as they blew up the dikes of the Yellow River, flooding a 54,000 square mile area and destroying 4,000 villages in the process, but thus gaining a few crucial weeks of respite.

The IJA relaunched the campaign against Wuhan in July. The recently-activated 11th Army, with the 6th, 9th, 27th, 101st and 106th Divisions and supported by an IJN riverine flotilla including gunboats and supply ships, was to progress toward Wuhan by going up the Yangtze River Valley, whilst the 2nd Army (3rd, 10th, 13th and 16th Divisions) advanced from the west along the Dabie Mountains. This time, the Japanese had given up hope of encircling the forces facing them, roughly 800,000 troops mostly drawn from the warlords' armies and placed under the overall command of General Chen Cheng, one of the best Chinese strategists, and hoped that the capture of the new provisional KMT capital would prove enough to end the war. The Nationalists expected, to the contrary, to wage a protracted campaign and to bleed the IJA as much as they could even though the fall of Wuhan itself was deemed unavoidable. Thus, they arrayed their forces in a series of fortified positions along the Yangtze, setting the stage for the campaign. From the end of June to October, the 11th Army fought a series of battles along the Yangtze River Valley, breaking through one fortified zone after another, whilst having to repulse a series of determined Chinese counterattacks. As so often since the beginning of the war, their systematic manoeuvring against enemy flanks and superior firepower allowed them to repeatedly overcome numerically superior forces, although at a significant cost. When Wuhan fell at last on 25 October, the 11th Army alone had lost 4,567 killed and 17,380 wounded, and this without counting the thousands of soldiers affected by cholera, malaria and dysentery. Nationalist losses were even more staggering, with the IJA claiming to have counted the bodies of 143,493 fallen enemy soldiers. However,



The terrain often proved a formidable obstacle in its own right for the advancing Japanese columns, as amply shown by this Chinese defensive position. More often than not, the IJA dealt with these by outflanking them, thus forcing the enemy to withdraw, but also failing to annihilate them. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Chinese resistance had proven extremely determined – only 9,581 prisoners had been taken – with the Japanese having to resort to “special smoke”, the euphemism for chemical weapons, on several occasions to overcome it. Furthermore, by early September, the KMT had begun to withdraw from Wuhan, with the government establishing itself in Chungking, determined to pursue the war.²¹

No end in Sight

The Wuhan campaign arguably marked the high tide of Japanese operations for the forthcoming years, with their army finding itself overextended with increasingly larger bodies of troops tied down to control the conquered areas, especially as both the KMT and the Communist Party were increasing their efforts to wage guerrilla warfare in enemy-controlled areas. Therefore, the IJA switched to more limited operations designed to disperse large enemy concentrations, but without necessarily seeking to conquer new territories.

On 17 March 1939, the 11th Army launched an offensive targeting Nanchang with its 101st and 106th Divisions. The two reservist units, selected in order to have an opportunity to “redeem” themselves after their lacklustre performance during the Wuhan campaign, seized the town a few days later, but it turned out that they had stirred the proverbial hornets’ nest. One month later, the Chinese 19th and 32nd Army Groups launched a massive counterattack and even managed to reinvest part of the town, which became engulfed in fierce street fighting, before giving up on 8 May, the 11th Army having lost 500 killed during the battle. In September, the 11th Army was on the offensive again, launching a three-pronged advance against Changsha in order to disperse the Chinese 9th War Zone forces concentrated in the area. Thus between 13 and 22 September, three separate Japanese groupings began their advance toward Changsha; the first with the 101st and 106th Divisions, the second with the 3rd and 6th Divisions and the third with the 33rd Division. However, General Chen Cheng, CO of the 9th War Zone proved as adept at mobile warfare as his Japanese counterparts. The 101st and 106th Divisions became stuck in a series of battles against the 32nd, 60th, 72nd and 74th Armies almost as soon as they left Jingan, their point of departure, and had to withdraw after three weeks. Things did not go better for the 3rd and 6th Divisions, which

were allowed to penetrate deep into Nationalist territory before being attacked from all sides by the 4th, 52nd, 70th, 73rd and 87th Armies, and found themselves forced to wage a fighting withdrawal, arriving back at their initial positions on 8 October. Similarly, starting from 22 September, the 33rd Division made a 100-kilometre advance against increasing enemy resistance before returning back toward Tongshan on 14 October. The first battle of Changsha thus ended in a draw with both sides claiming victories. From the Chinese perspective, the 11th Army offensive had been thoroughly beaten with heavy losses whilst for the Japanese,

the 9th War Zone had been enfeebled as intended, and at a limited cost with around 850 soldiers killed and another 2,700 wounded, whilst they claimed to have killed at least 44,000 enemy soldiers – but to have taken fewer than 400 prisoners of war.

It was obvious however that such operations would never suffice to bring the war to a conclusion. Indeed, on the strategic level, it was hoped that a systematic bombing campaign, primarily by the IJN air arm against Chungking, the new provisional capital, together with a series of operations designed to sever the links between the Nationalists and the outside world would eventually force the KMT to give up the struggle. On 12 October 1938, the 12th Army landed in Bias Bay before defeating the Chinese 12th Army Group and investing the town of Canton on 21 October. In February 1939, another amphibious operation allowed the IJA to seize Hainan Island, but the Nationalist regime remained determined as ever. Unsurprisingly, the air raids against Chungking, dubbed the “Chungking Milk Run” by the aircrew and which began in May 1939, failed to produce decisive results either, despite being the first strategic bombing campaign ever. The Japanese were thus hopelessly stuck in a quagmire of their own making, which was swallowing more and more resources, with the number of divisions engaged in China having grown from 16 in 1937 to 25 in 1939. The Army itself, despite its tactical superiority, lost 92,000 killed and 216,000 wounded during these two years, whilst the “Chinese Incident” was exacting a heavy burden on both Japanese society and the economy to sustain the war effort.²²

2

RIKOGUN

One of the first priorities of the new Meiji government in the aftermath of the Boshin War was to build an armed force that would be exclusively loyal to the throne and hence, the central authorities, whilst previously, the country had relied on the assembly of forces provided by the various Daimyo and their provincial armies. The process proved convoluted however, primarily because it took time to overcome the traditionalists and because the new army's ranks were largely filled with soldiers and officers, from the Satsuma, Choshu and Tosa clans – the winners of the civil war. Among these, it was the natives of the Choshu clan who especially had the lion's share of high-ranking positions. By 1888, 16 out of 42 general officers belonged to the Choshu, and this domination was to last until the

beginning of the 20th century, that is, until a new generation of officers reached the Army's higher echelons.

The core of the new Imperial Army was none other than the Imperial Guard, raised in 1871. This 6,200-man combined arms formation included infantry, cavalry and artillery units and was expanded thereafter into two brigades. Regular Army units followed in kind, with the institution reaching a strength of 33,000 men in 1875, three years after the promulgation of a conscription law which allowed it to double in size. Whilst the new force proved more than enough to quell the numerous uprisings that took place during the Meiji era's first decades, the looming Russian threat and the national economy's expansion provided the reason and the means

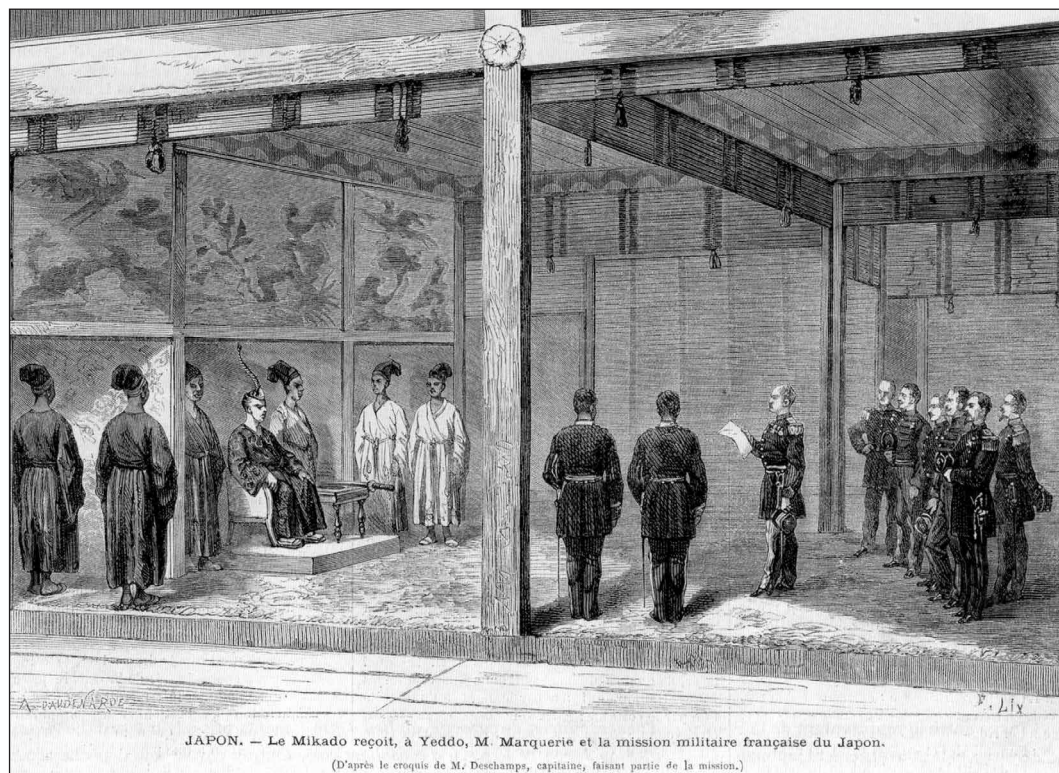
to launch an ambitious 10-year program in 1882 seeking to expand the force, which still comprised 42,530 men in 1880, to a modern seven division strong force, including the Imperial Guard Division, whilst abandoning the garrison system around which the Army had been structured so far. By 1892, the army thus included around 70,000 active personals and could mobilise another 240,000 reservists if needed. In the meantime, efforts had been made to create a network of schools to train the needed officers, NCOs and specialists, as well to produce firearms and artillery in Japan, thus laying the basis of a national industry. Of note was the induction in 1889 of the locally designed and produced Murata rifle, which remained the standard Army rifle until 1910. However, artillery production proved more difficult, even though the import of foreign technologies and know-how allowed for the fabrication of several models of bronze field and mountain guns.¹

French-German Competition

Building a modern army from nothing obviously required some foreign expertise and the new regime simply chose to continue the cooperation already initiated by the Shogunate with the French,



Woodblock depicting Imperial Guards assaulting a Russian gun battery early in the Russo-Japanese War, in November 1904. (Open source)



JAPON. — Le Mikado reçoit, à Yeddo, M. Marquerie et la mission militaire française du Japon.

(D'après le croquis de M. Deschamps, capitaine, faisant partie de la mission.)

Emperor Meiji receiving a delegation of French military advisers in 1872. (Open source)

who had already dispatched a mission of military advisers to the country. The French officers, whose number culminated at 43 in 1875 proved instrumental in helping to set up a series of officer schools and to diffuse their own doctrine to the Japanese Army. However, Paris's influence proved rather short-lived and before long was superseded by another European military powerhouse.

In 1884, a delegation of four Japanese officers was dispatched to Europe for a one year long journey to study the different European armies. As a result, a Prussian officer, Major Klemens Wilhelm Jacob Meckel, arrived in Japan at the beginning of the next year to act as a teacher in the Rikugun daigakko; the Advanced War School, and gradually, despite the extremely reduced number of German advisers present in the country, the whole IJA turned away from French influence and modelled itself according to the German pattern. In 1889, the German field regulations were translated and adopted by the IJA. Even the standard infantry division structure was patterned following the Prussian mountain infantry divisions, with each including two infantry brigades controlling two infantry regiments each, and thus becoming known as the "square" divisions in the IJA. In the meantime, the divisions were embedded in and corresponded to specific regions, where they drew their conscripts. Thus Army units developed a very strong linkage with local communities and gave birth to depot divisions tied to specific areas and whose number corresponded to combat divisions which were based in the same region.² Furthermore, and perhaps even more crucial for the building up of the IJA decision-making culture, the officers' training syllabus was modelled according to German command philosophy, with the switch between French and German command philosophies being explained by Nagaoka Gaishi, a former military academy student at the time;

Having realised that the defeat in 1870 was due to a lack of knowledge, the French military authorities have since then made it their priority to improve military training. And to do this, the French drafted much more detailed military manuals but at the same time [these were] complicated to understand. The French military has always been very respectful of common sense and may not obey their superiors. This means that if a decision taken by a superior does not conform to military standards, the French do not hesitate to criticise it and ignore their hierarchy. The German Army's infantry military manuals are very simple to read and the number of pages is almost half that of French manuals.



A Type 4 150mm Howitzer in action during the battle of Shanghai. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A Type 95 light tank seen on the march during the Nomonhan incident. Whilst well-armed with one 37mm cannon and two MGs, they were nimble but also extremely thinly protected. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

German soldiers are so obedient to their commander's orders that they sometimes tend to leave reason aside. As a result, even if there are disadvantages in the textbooks, they do not bother to criticise them specifically. It seems that the Germans always avoid laying down very detailed rules and try to leave a lot of authority and freedom to the commander.³

Human Bullets

This Prussian legacy was to play a crucial role during the next decades, with the Imperial Japanese Army being for instance obsessed with German concepts such as the decisive battle and envelopment manoeuvres. The Army continued to grow at a fast pace with a new expansion program being adopted in 1898, and then the raising of new units during the Russo-Japanese War, when as many as 25 divisions were in existence, whilst by 1918, the IJA included 21 permanent peacetime divisions. Surprisingly enough considering the devastation caused by the large-scale use of weapons such as machine guns and modern artillery, the victory against Russia marked a significant switch toward a strengthening of the already existing Japanese propensity to rely on immaterial factors as decisive in conducting successful war operations. Indeed, the troops' fighting spirit, the so-called and supposedly uniquely Japanese *Seishin*, was widely assessed as having proved itself as key in Japanese successes on the battlefield, superseding even firepower, whilst several instances of soldiers, dubbed "human bullets", sacrificing themselves to breach enemy positions were widely communicated among the public at

large, with the following text of statesman Okuma Shigenobu being a good example of this romanticising of self-sacrifice;

The soldiers vie with each other to offer themselves on the altar of their country; the spirit of self-sacrifice prevails to a marked degree. This is the true characteristic of the race of Yamato. [...] Even the lowest of soldiers fought in battlefields with unflinching courage, and faced death as if it were going home. [...] Their display of the true spirit of the Japanese samurai is radically different from the behaviour of men who appear on the fighting line with only the prospect of decorations and money before their eyes.⁴

Accordingly, the IJA reshuffled its practice and began to place an even greater emphasis on close combat and bayonet practice and, at the operational level, the offensive, speed and manoeuvre whilst the numbers of field guns allocated to each division was even reduced post-war, although mainly because of cost issues. In the meantime, officers, even from relatively high-ranking positions, were expected to lead ever more from the front whilst cultivating the troops' fighting spirit with indoctrination and iron discipline. Harsh training became part of the Army ethos. Infantry thus became the undisputed queen of the battlefield, and all of this became official doctrine once it was engraved in the 1909 Army field manual.⁵

Post-War Controversies

Aside from the siege of Tsingtao, the IJA did not participate in any meaningful way in the First World War and was thus not directly exposed to the major evolutions in war-making that characterised the conflict, and noticeably the unprecedented amounts of firepower deployed on the battlefield.

The post-war era was marked by a protracted struggle among the IJA officer corps between traditionalists and modernists. The former remained dedicated to the previous dogmas whilst the modernists advocated a smaller but better-equipped standing army. According to them, any new war would be protracted and would mobilise all the nation's resources. Under their influence, four divisions were dissolved in 1925 and the funds thus liberated allocated to endeavours such as an expansion of the Army Air Corps, the raising of two tank regiments and an increase in the number of machine guns, both medium and light, allocated to the infantry battalions. However, the traditionalists continued to have the upper hand and the IJA doctrine and belief system inherited from the post Russo-Japanese War period not only remained but became even more emphasised.

The 1928 edition of the *Tosui Koryo* (*The Principles of Command*), the very bible of IJA officers, confirmed again that the Army was to seek decisive engagement at the onset of any conflict by conducting



A typical Type 11 LMG crew in position, ready to cover the advance of their squad. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

extremely aggressive manoeuvre warfare and this was to be emulated in the entire hierarchy to the lowest tactical levels. Accordingly, what can only be described as a cult of the offensive which became almost a solution to all tactical situations was promulgated, with words such as "surrender", "retreat" and "defence" being struck from the booklet. A defensive stance in itself was only acceptable to gain the time needed to launch new attacks and nothing more. Emphasis continued to be placed on the infantry, with the role of the other arms being merely to support it. In turn, the infantry was supposed to succeed by outmanoeuvring the opponent and using night or dawn attacks and close-quarter combat. This doctrine was of course inextricably linked to the carefully nurtured spiritual strength of Japanese soldiers, which were supposed to be unrivalled thanks to their aggressive spirit, ability to endure and their will to sacrifice themselves if needed. In turn, all of this was supposed to allow the IJA to defeat an opponent expected to be superior both in numbers and equipment, considering the relative weakness of Japanese industrial capabilities. This opponent was none other than the Soviet Army, with Moscow being perceived as the IJA's main foe



A 70mm Type 92 Battalion Gun. This uniquely Japanese design was a kind of "pocket-howitzer" supposed to replace both mortars and 37mm infantry guns. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Another uniquely Japanese weapon was the Type 89 grenade discharger which provided infantry companies with a considerable amount of firepower at close range. (Open source)

since the end of the 19th century. In essence, the IJA doctrine was tailor-made to beat the Soviet forces in mainland Asia, much as the IJN doctrine was designed to vanquish the US Fleet in the Pacific.

Whilst World War One thus failed to change the core of the IJA's doctrine, this did not mean that it did not seek to integrate lessons drawn from the belligerent's experiences. To the contrary, around 350 IJA officers were sent to Europe during the years that followed the war to draw lessons on a wide array of topics. Perhaps the most crucial result of this effort was the universal adoption in the IJA of the *Sturmtruppen* infiltration tactics developed by the Germans during the second half of the conflict. Reports from these observers also led to the development and introduction of LMGs and battalion guns in direct support of the infantry battalions.⁶

On the other hand, increasing army combat units' mobility through motorisation remained out of the question. Japanese industry was hopelessly unable to meet the corresponding needs and produced fewer than 1,000 automobiles in 1933, whilst the Army estimated that it would need 250,000 vehicles to motorise its wartime order of battle. Besides, motorisation was deemed as

ill-suited to mainland Asia because of its endemic lack of paved roads. IJA mobility thus continued to rely on railways and horses as it had during the previous decades. This meant in turn that its manoeuvre warfare doctrine was to be conducted at the speed of its infantrymen, whilst their support relied primarily on horse- and mule-power. Unsurprisingly, the IJA invested much energy into training its soldiers to force march over considerable distances.⁷

Organisation

In early 1937, the peacetime IJA included 247,000 men in 17 divisions, all infantry. However, the protracted war against China forced the

Army to double in size in a single year, with 34 active divisions in late summer 1938, with 24 of these under the North China Area Army and Central China Expeditionary Army which in turn controlled between them three armies, the 1st, 2nd and 11th. In IJA terminology, armies were thus the equivalent of corps whilst the Area or Expeditionary armies were akin to theatre commands. Another eight divisions were defending Manchuria under the aegis of the Kwantung Army, whilst one division, the 19th, was part of the Korea Army. Only the Imperial Guard Division remained in Japan.

The IJA was also in the midst of wide-ranging evolution and its units' organisations were anything but uniform as the Army was transiting from square to triangular divisions, whilst several newly raised divisions were less-well equipped than their older counterparts. Standard square infantry divisions were powerful formations. Centred around their two brigades with two infantry regiments each, these also included a field or mountain artillery regiment with three batteries of three companies each – 36 guns in total, a cavalry regiment whose two cavalry and single machine gun squadrons were dedicated to reconnaissance duties, a medical

regiment, a transport regiment and an engineer regiment, aside of various smaller units. Together, these included 25,179 men with 8,177 horses. The organisation of the triangular divisions, which were intended to be more mobile whilst concentrating more firepower, was roughly the same except that they lacked one brigade headquarters and one infantry regiment compared to their square counterparts. However, the first five of these, the 15th, 17th, 21st, 22nd and 26th, were raised only in 1938 whilst other newly created divisions continuing to be built along the

Table 1: The IJA's main units in mid-1938⁸

Area commands	Armies	Units
Kwantung Army		1st, 2nd, 4th, 8th, 12th and 26th Divisions, 1st, 3rd and 4th Cavalry Brigades, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Independent Garrison Units and Commands
North China Area Army		5th & 114th Divisions, 3rd, 5th and 13th Mixed Brigades
	1st Army	14th, 20th, 108th and 109th Divisions, 3rd and 4th Mixed Brigades
Central China Expeditionary Army		15th, 17th, 18th, 22nd and 116th Divisions
	2nd Army	3rd, 10th, 13th and 16th Divisions
	11th Army	6th, 9th, 27th, 101st and 106th Divisions, China Garrison Brigade
Korea Army		19th Division
In Japan		Imperial Guard Division

square pattern. The Army also activated from 1934 onwards several independent mixed brigades. These included five infantry battalions and artillery and engineer detachments, 4,891 men and 517 officers in total. A total of 13 such units were raised by early 1939 and most of these were used for rear-areas security duties in China.

The roughly 3,800 men and 700 horse strong infantry regiments had three infantry battalions. From 1934 on, these regiments also included an anti-tank company equipped with the 37mm Type 94 AT gun and an infantry gun company with four 75mm Type 41 pack guns as the latter were withdrawn from the artillery and thus became available to reinforce the infantry.

The IJA was gradually reinforcing the firepower of the infantry battalions too. By early 1938, these were intended to include an infantry gun platoon with two Type 92 70mm infantry howitzers – a uniquely Japanese concept of a piece of ordnance designed to replace both the 70mm mortars and 37mm direct fire guns previously in service – as well as a machine gun company equipped with eight Type 92 7.7mm Heavy Machine Guns (HMG). These two units supported the battalion's four infantry companies. The latter were organised into an HQ element and three platoons, which in turn were organised in four squads. The first three of these included 14 men with 11 rifles and one Type 11 Light Machine Gun (LMG) as well as a grenade discharger squad with 13 men, 10 rifles and three Type 89 50mm grenade dischargers. The latter were another uniquely Japanese design and able to throw grenades or specially designed shells to roughly 650 metres.⁹ The standard Army rifle was the well-proven and reliable Type 38, using a modified Mauser bolt mechanism. The Type 38 rifles, the Type 11 LMG and later on the Type 96 LMG, fired the same 6.5mm calibre rounds, which were later assessed as lacking power, enticing the Army to adopt 7.7mm calibre instead and to induce new rifles and LMGs from 1940 on. Altogether, Japanese infantry had adequate firepower, similar to those in Western nations, with the lack of sub-machine guns being more than compensated for by the large numbers of Type 89 grenade dischargers, which proved itself again and again a very effective weapon.

The Artillery Problem

By the end of the 1920s, the IJA had also begun to renew its divisional artillery parks, filled with Type 38 field guns, Type 41 cavalry guns and Type 41 mountain guns, all of 75mm calibre and Type 38 120mm howitzers. All these were based on early 20th century Krupp designs and were growing obsolescent and thus in need of replacement. However, to do so, the Army met with several major constraints, foremost the national industry's inability to swiftly build large numbers of guns – a single Type 15 150mm cannon took as much as eight months to produce – and corresponding numbers of shells. In 1936, government arsenals produced only 111,000 such munitions, whilst corresponding wartimes needs were estimated at 10 times that number. This endemic lack of ammunition forced their crew to minimise shell expenditure by reaching high levels of accuracy, following a rather illusory “one round, one hit” doctrine. For the same reason, the IJA artillery favoured direct infantry support and seldom used massive artillery concentrations and protracted barrages.

The new generations of guns were also to remain as light as possible in order to be easily transportable, with the 75mm calibre continuing to come at a premium whilst other armies were increasingly switching to 100mm or 105mm calibre guns. This was made even worse by the Army decision in the early 1930s to disband the fourth battalion from each artillery regiment. In



A column of Type 94 tankettes in China. Whilst designed to carry supplies, these were often used as “mini-tanks” of sorts. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

essence, IJA divisional firepower was beginning to seriously lag behind those of the other main powers' armies. To add salt to the wound, it also proved impossible to totally replace the old artillery parks. Cooperation with the French firm Schneider allowed Japanese designers to develop the excellent Type 90 75mm field gun, produced first in a horse-drawn variant and later on in a motorised one fitted with pneumatic tires and spring suspension. Thanks to the use of an autofrettaged barrel, the Type 90 could lob shells to a staggering 13,900 metres but its production was interrupted in 1935 in favour of the less powerful but simpler Type 95 field gun of the same calibre. The cooperation with Schneider also gave birth to the Type 91 105mm Howitzer which could fire at 10,730 metres. Three years thereafter, the new Type 94 75mm mountain gun, which could be dismantled into 11 sections and thus be horse- or man-packed, was also adopted allowing the reclassification of the old Type 38 mountain guns as infantry regimental guns. However, the quantity produced – with 221 Type 90, 193 Type 95 field guns and 405 Type 91 field howitzers delivered between 1931 and 1939 – were totally insufficient to rejuvenate the parks of a fast-expanding army. The IJA thus also had to modernise hundreds of the old Type 38 field guns, with several modifications succeeding in increasing their range to 9,450 metres, to fill the gap. However, even this was insufficient and by 1939, some divisional artillery regiments continued to include obsolete pieces of ordnance such as the Type 38 120mm field howitzer with its 5,669 metres range.

Of course, the IJA artillery also operated several models of much more powerful field guns and howitzers of 105mm and 150mm



Another column passing through a Chinese village, this time of far more potent Type 89 tanks, the first design ever produced in Japan. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

calibre, with the newest models, also developed with the help of Schneider, having very good performance, but these were few in number and allocated to separate heavy field artillery regiments which were attached to armies and divisions as needed, and of which eight were active by the mid-1930s. Whilst the number of

regiments expanded thereafter, production of newly-designed guns lagged behind the needs – only 93 examples of the Type 92 105mm gun were produced between 1931 and 1939 – and several regiments continued, as with the divisional artillery, to be equipped with outdated models such as the Type 4 150mm howitzer with its maximum range of 8,780 metres.

Anti-aircraft artillery was not a redeeming feature of the IJA either. During the early 1920s, the Army acquired two types of anti-aircraft (AA) guns in small quantities, the 75mm Type 11 and the 10.5cm Type 14 but both of these proved a disappointment. Thus, in 1928, the IJA introduced a new design, the 75mm Type 88, which proved much more satisfactory and remained the standard heavy AA gun until 1945. The gun itself was paired with the Type 90 Director which was satisfactory for its time but increasingly fell behind the fast-growing performances of combat aircraft. The Type 88 gun was produced in comparatively large quantities, with 912 coming out of the factories between 1931 and 1939. On the other hand, the Army lost considerable time before introducing a potent small-calibre AA weapon with the Type 98 20mm machine-cannon entering into production only in 1938, and with slightly fewer than 300 being delivered by the end of the next year. Thus, the mainstay of close range anti-aircraft defence during the 1930s lay with Type 92 7.7mm HMGs mounted on dedicated tripods.

The relative abundance of Type 88 guns allowed the Army to raise 18 AA regiments up to the end of 1939, numbered from 1 to 6, 9 to 13, 15 to 17 and 20 to 23. These were organised into two battalions with two four-gun batteries each, even if some of these were smaller with two Type 88 batteries and a single Type 98 battery. By the end of 1939, four of these regiments defended Japan, another two Korea, six were assigned to Manchuria and the last six were deployed in China. The IJA also deployed a number of independent field AA units, each centred around a single Type 88 battery, in Manchuria and China.¹⁰

Sensha

From the onset, the IJA never emphasised cavalry and until the mid-1930s, aside from the single regiment attached for reconnaissance

purposes in each division, its peacetime establishment included only four cavalry brigades, numbered from 1 to 4, whilst in 1936, these were reduced in size from three to two cavalry regiments. On the other hand, the Army took a keen interest in one of the most spectacular First World War technological developments; tanks. Single examples or small batches of Mark IV, Medium Mark A Whippet and Renault FT were bought abroad in the years that followed the conflict and some of these were even deployed in Siberia. Such limited acquisitions continued for a few years thereafter with Vickers Mark C and Renault NC-27 tanks. In between, the Army raised its first two tank companies in 1925. The same



A Type 41 Infantry Regimental Gun in battery in the plains of Manchuria. Those were used almost exclusively as direct fire weapons. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A 7.7mm Type 92 HMG in action. This machine gun proved reliable and well-liked among the troops. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A Type 88 75mm AA gun in battery. All through the 1930s, this was an up-to-date and potent weapon. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

year, it was decided to develop an indigenous tank design, and this gave birth to the Type 89 Chi-Ro medium tank, accepted for service in 1929 but whose production began in 1931, with a total of 404 vehicles being produced until 1939. The first version of the tank was equipped with a gasoline engine but this was replaced with a more reliable and safer 120hp diesel engine, with Japan being the first country to use exclusively diesel engines for its tanks. Despite their lack of experience, the Japanese engineers had succeeded in designing an efficient tank, superior to the contemporary Renault NC-27. It weighed slightly more than 10 tons, carried a crew of four whilst its top speed reached 27km/h. It was armed with a low-velocity 57mm gun. Arguably, it is the Type 89 which marked the entrance of both Japanese industry and Army into the tank era.

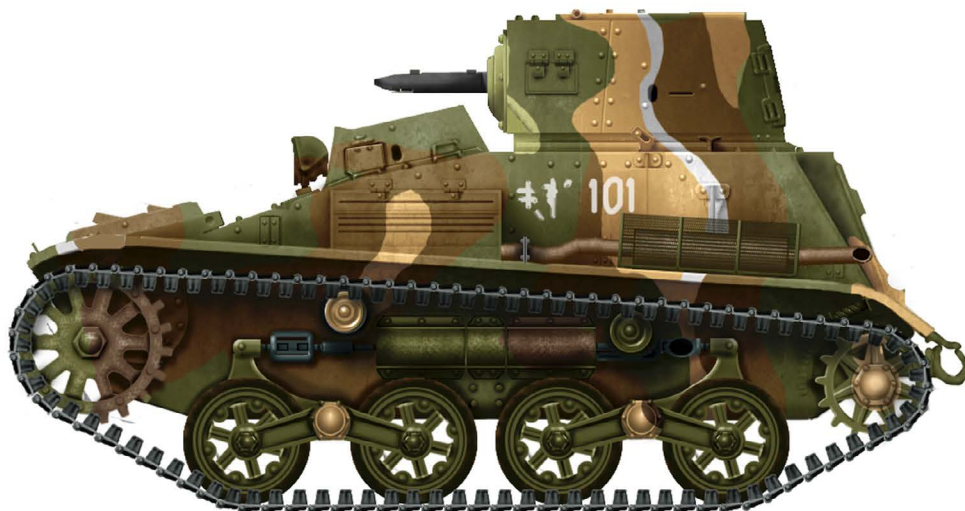
Next followed a completely different, extremely light, model developed to fulfil the cavalry's need for a much faster and mobile tank. The corresponding Type 92 cavalry tank weighed a mere 3.9 tons, was barely protected – with the thickest parts having only 6mm of armour – and was armed with two machine guns. It proved a disappointment because of its weak suspension and only 167 were produced between 1933 and 1936. This was, however, not the end of the Japanese fascination for light designs. The Army opted to acquire a tankette, primarily to carry supplies to frontline

troops thanks to their ability to tow a protected trailer, and this led to the induction of the Type 94 tankette, also equipped with an MG in a small turret in order to be also able to provide fire support for the infantry. The tankette was produced in large quantities, with 823 being inducted between 1935 and 1939. In practice however, the Type 94 was widely used more as a light tank and deployed for reconnaissance duties in China, where, unsurprisingly, it proved ill-adapted for tasks it was not designed for. This led the Army to switch to the Type 97 tankette, which lost the ability to tow a trailer, but was equipped with a turret carrying a 37mm gun. These began to be produced in 1937 and 274 had been delivered by the end of 1939.

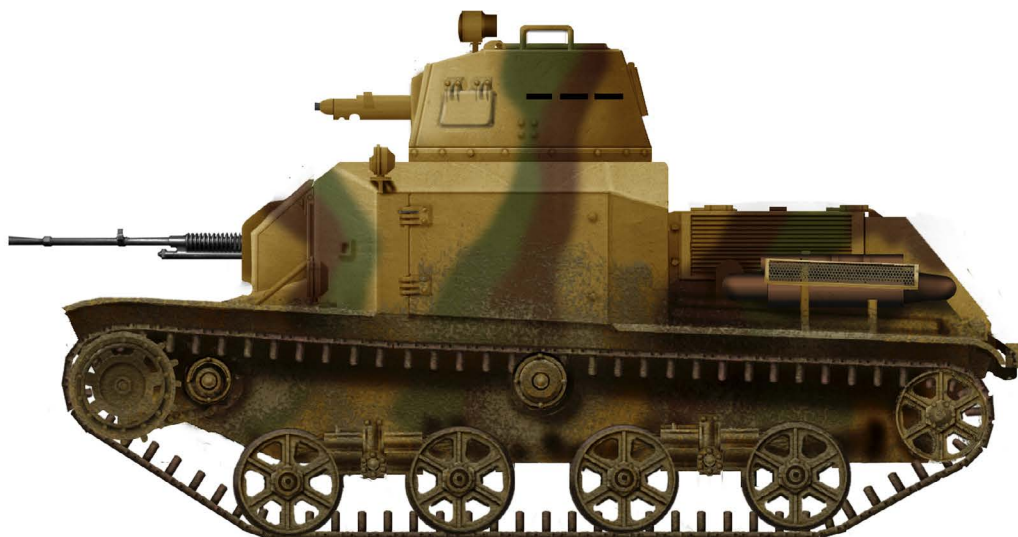
The failure of the Type 92 cavalry tank enticed the Army to launch the development in 1933 of a new light tank which became the Type 95 Ha-Go. The latter, developed by Mitsubishi, was accepted in 1935 and 279 were produced between 1936 and 1939. The Ha-Go weighed 7.7 tons and was lightly protected but was powered by the same diesel engine as the Type 89 Otsu and overall showed good mobility. It carried a single 37mm gun and two MGs, one in the front-hull and the other in the turret, manned by a single man. Meanwhile, the slow speed of the Type 89 combined with the emergence abroad of fast tanks led to the development of a new medium tank, the Type 97 Chi-Ha, which, while carrying the same 57mm gun as its predecessor, weighed 15 tons, was faster and better protected, whilst carrying a crew of four. One hundred and ten were manufactured in 1938 and another 202 in 1939. Both the Type 95 and the Type 97 were to become the mainstay of the Japanese armoured corps for the years to come but in essence remained paradoxes; they were intended for the infantry support role but were also lightly armoured and thus ill-adapted for tank-versus-tank battles or acting as frontline battering rams. On the other hand, they were fast, reliable and mobile. Only the platoon leaders' tanks were fitted with radios, and orders were relayed by flag signals as a result.

A Failed Experiment

The influx of newly produced vehicles allowed the Army to expand the number of its tank units. Three battalions were raised in 1933 and by mid-1937, the Army included five such battalions. The following year, these were redesignated as regiments although they remained in essence battalion-sized units. Their organisation varied with anything between two and four tank companies whilst even the platoons' strength was not uniform; some having three, others four;



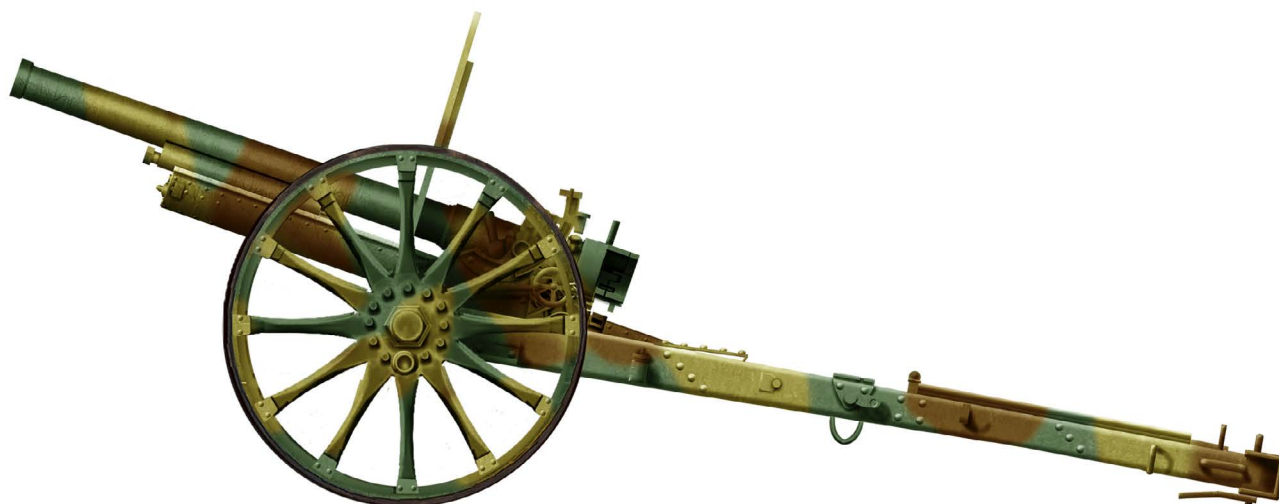
The Type 94 tankette (or, to use literal translation from its Japanese designation: 'light armoured car') was based on the Carden-Loyd Mk VI tankette design from Great Britain. It was deployed in 'Tankette Companies' starting in 1935 for resupply or reconnaissance duties. In China, this thinly armoured vehicle, armed with a single 6.5mm or 7.7mm MG, was frequently used for reconnaissance and infantry support: of course, this was only possible because of the opposition's endemic lack of anti-tank weapons. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



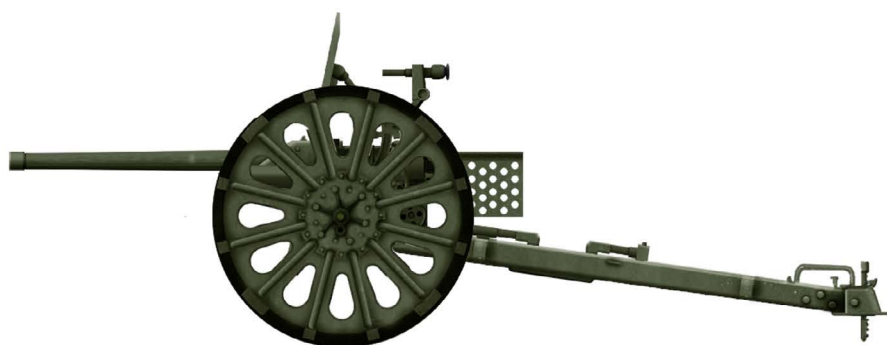
The Type 92 Jyu Sokosha Cavalry Tank (shown is a late version) was designed by the Ishikawajima Motor Company. Intended to be fast, these were extremely lightly protected with 6mm-thick armour plates, to the point of being vulnerable to machine gun fire at close range, and suffered from a weak suspension. Initially armed with two 6.5mm MGs, most were retrofitted with a hull-mounted 13.2mm HMG. These were assigned to cavalry brigades but did not see much combat before their withdrawal from service. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



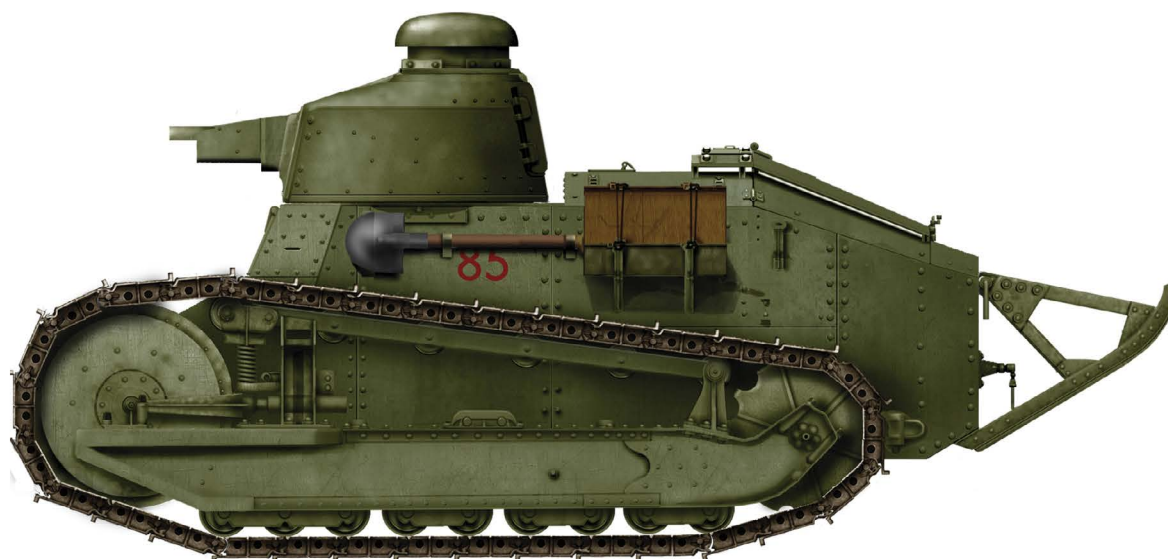
The IJA proved keen to study the technologies which emerged from the First World War, and tanks were a priority among these. Accordingly, several small batches of British and French designs were bought immediately after the war for testing purposes. At the end of the 1920s, several new models were imported, including a batch of 23 Renault NC-27s from France. A development of the FT-17, the NC-27 Otsu Gata Sensha was armed with either a 6.5mm MG or a 37mm gun. These were assigned to the 1st and 2nd Independent Tank Companies and were engaged in Manchuria and the First Shanghai Incident. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



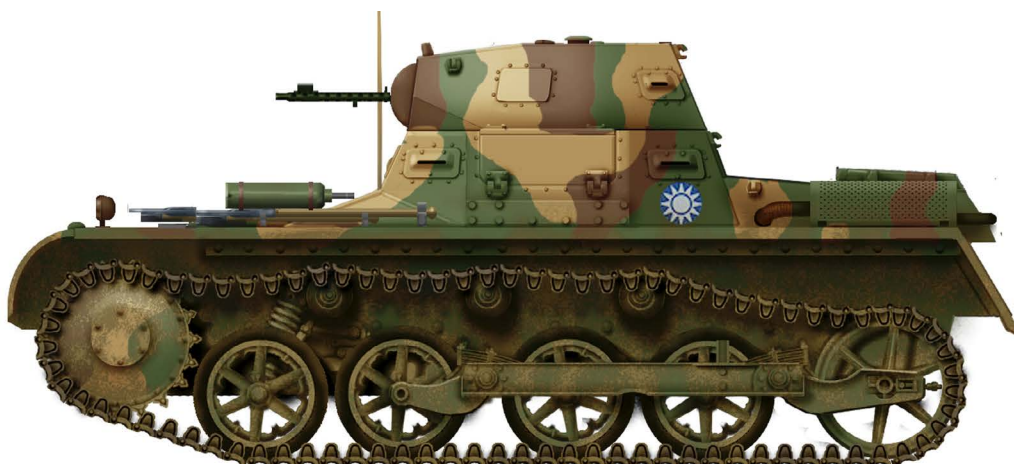
The 75mm Type 90 Field Gun was a modern weapon, derived from a French Schneider design. Thanks to its auto-frettaged barrel, it had a high muzzle velocity (675 m/s) providing a range of 13,900 metres. One variant was designed to be motor-drawn and another horse-drawn. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The main Japanese anti-tank weapon was the 37mm Type 94 gun, which entered production in 1934 in the Osaka Arsenal. Each infantry regiment had either four or six of these weapons. Able to pierce 21mm of armour at 500 metres range, it was able to deal with virtually all Chinese and Soviet vehicles, except the later Soviet "heavies", in service at the time. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



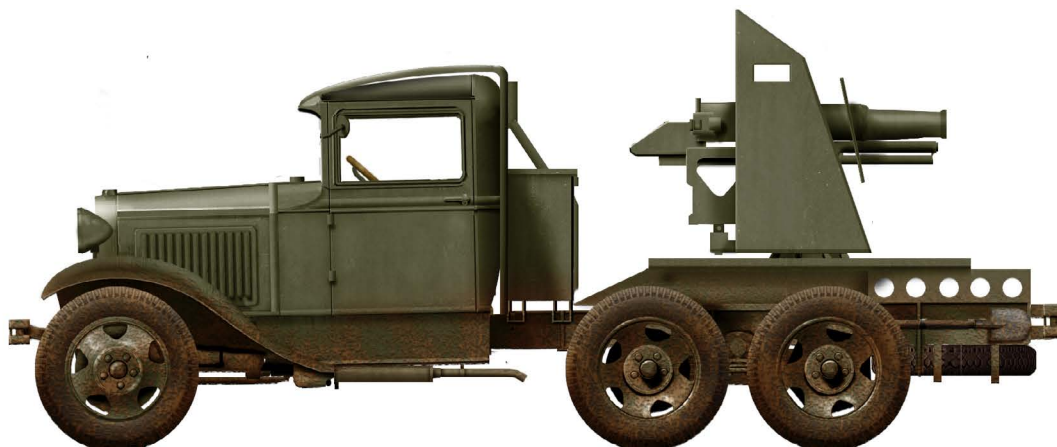
The Old Marshal managed to equip the Fengtian Army with the first ever tanks to enter Chinese service: he acquired a batch of Renault FT-17 light tanks left behind by the French once they withdrew from Siberia in 1920 and in 1924-1925, he purchased a second batch of FT-17s. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



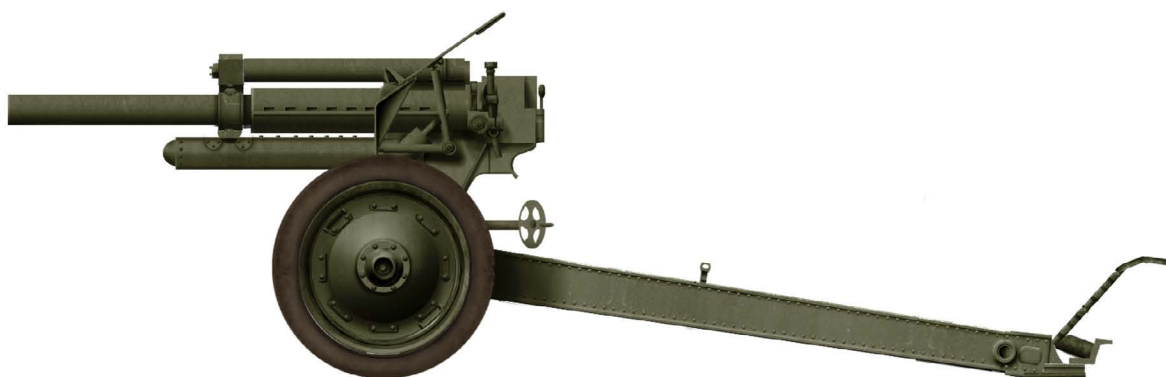
In May 1936, the Chinese Nationalists placed an order for 15 PzKpfw I (or 'Panzer I') light tanks with the Handelsgesellschaft zur Verwertung Industrieller Produkte in Germany. These were delivered a few months later but proved unsuited for China – primarily because their engines constantly overheated. All had been lost by the end of December 1937. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



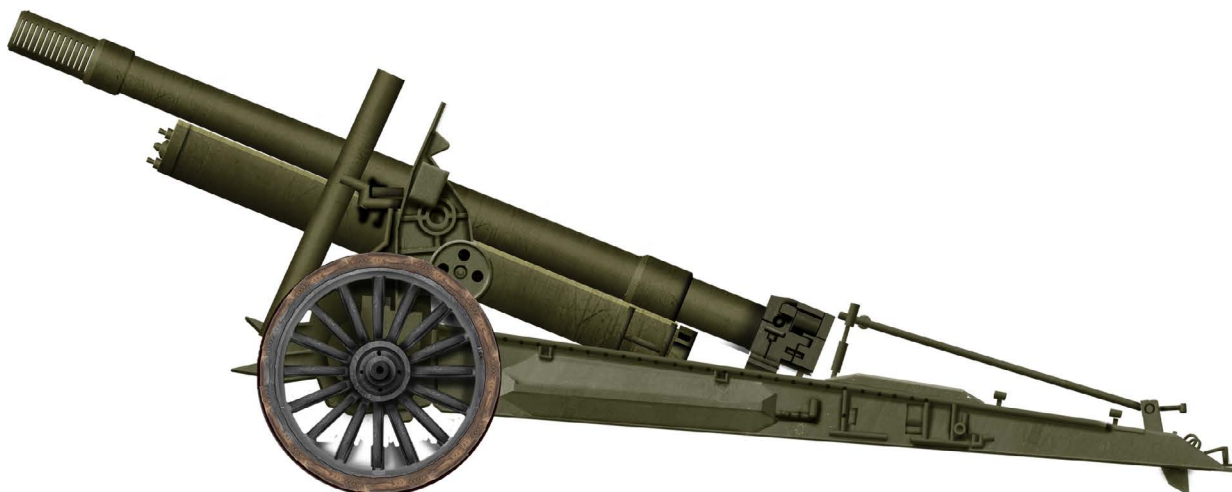
Once the war between China and Japan erupted, the Soviets rushed to support the Nationalists. Among the massive quantities of equipment delivered were 82 T-26 tanks. These were used to form a tank regiment in 1938. Thanks to their 45mm gun, these were superior to contemporary IJA tanks. However, they seldom had a chance to engage enemy armour because of their limited numbers and the sheer vastness of the theatre. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The SU-1-12 was an early version of what would today be called a 'technical', essentially a 76mm M1927 gun (on a rotating platform) on a GAZ-AAA truck. Around 100 of these self-propelled guns were produced though they were extremely vulnerable as they were almost entirely unprotected. A few of these allegedly took part in the Lake Khasan battle. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The 122mm calibre M1930 Howitzer was introduced to the RKKA in 1939, with the intent of replacing earlier designs such as the M1909 and M1910 of the same calibre which, although modernised, were growing obsolete. Such guns were to prove instrumental in giving the RKKA an edge over its opponents during the Great Patriotic War. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The 152mm calibre ML-20 gun-howitzer was another artillery piece born from the RKKA artillery modernisation programme conducted during the 1930s. It entered in service in 1937 and proved a reliable and potent weapon, able to fire at targets up to 17 kilometres away. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The 45mm M1932 anti-tank gun was based on a Rheinmetall design and was introduced to the RKKA in 1932. For their time, these were powerful weapons, able to deal with most armoured vehicles in worldwide service in the first half of the 1930s. Indeed, at Changkufeng, the Japanese made good use of the pair of M1932 captured early during the incident, where they proved vastly superior to their own Type 94 field guns. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



This Major of the Japanese armoured troops is shown wearing the summer version of the tanker's overalls, with the rank insignia above the top pocket. On his head is a canvas-covered cork helmet worn by tank crew, with protective goggles. His uniform is completed by the (standard) white gloves, whilst his lower legs are enclosed in leather gaiters, atop of standard leather boots. His armament consists of the Type-94 *shin-gunto* officer sword, and the 8mm Type-14 pistol with a leather cord worn diagonally around the torso. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

Most of the Soviet Army infantry went into the clashes with the Imperial Japanese Army wearing the M35 summer field uniform, which consists of the light cotton field blouse (*gymnastiorka*), trousers, and *Kirza* boots. The equipment of this soldier comprises the M1936 steel helmet, the M1938 pack, M35 enlisted belt with M38 brown supporting straps and leather ammunition pouches for his rifle. Shown in his left hand is the RGD-33 grenade, whilst in his right hand is the 7.62mm calibre M1891/30 Mosin Nagant rifle. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

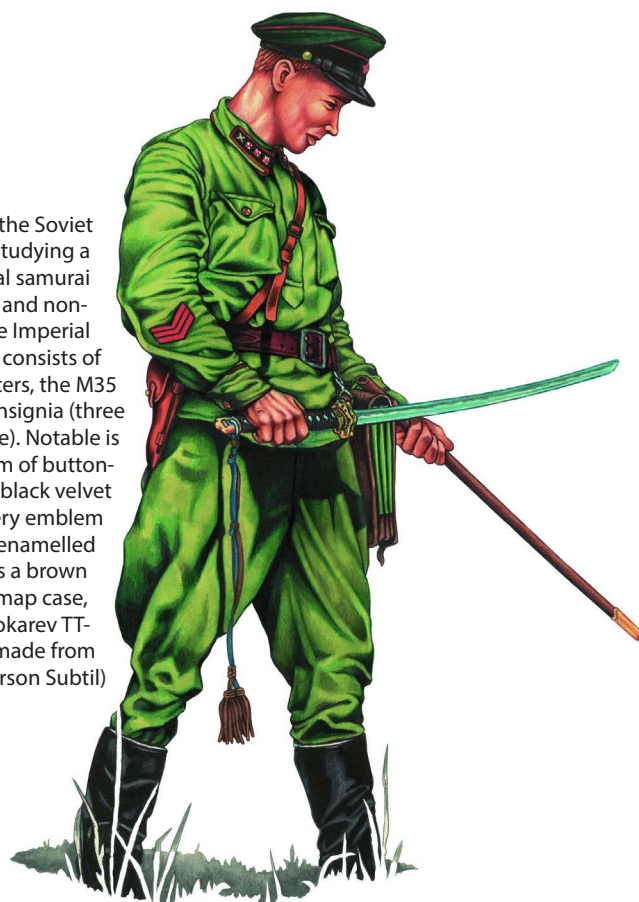


This Japanese superior private is shown using the Type-11 machine gun (with a metal ammunition box for 6.5x50 Arisaka magazines underneath), whilst wearing the Showa 5 winter uniform with the 1939 pattern rucksack, Type-90 helmet and a Seiko watch from 1924. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



This infantryman of the Mongolian People's Army is shown wearing a uniform similar to the 1935 model of the Soviet Army (but with local rank insignia), a Chinese-style field hat, leather riding boots, fabric rifle ammo pouches (wrapped around the regulatory leather belt), and the traditional Mongolian sabre. His armament consists of a Mosin Nagant rifle, and a socket bayonet. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

This Senior Lieutenant of the Soviet Army is shown whilst studying a captured *Gunto* – a traditional samurai sword used by officers and non-commissioned officers of the Imperial Japanese Army. His uniform consists of a peaked field cap for officers, the M35 summer field dress with rank insignia (three stripes in red on each sleeve). Notable is additional insignia in the form of button-holes at the collar, with black velvet decorated with red, an artillery emblem and three *cubari* – red enamelled squares. His gear includes a brown Model 1932 leather belt with map case, the Model 1936 holster for a Tokarev TT-33 pistol, and officers' boots made from pig-skin. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



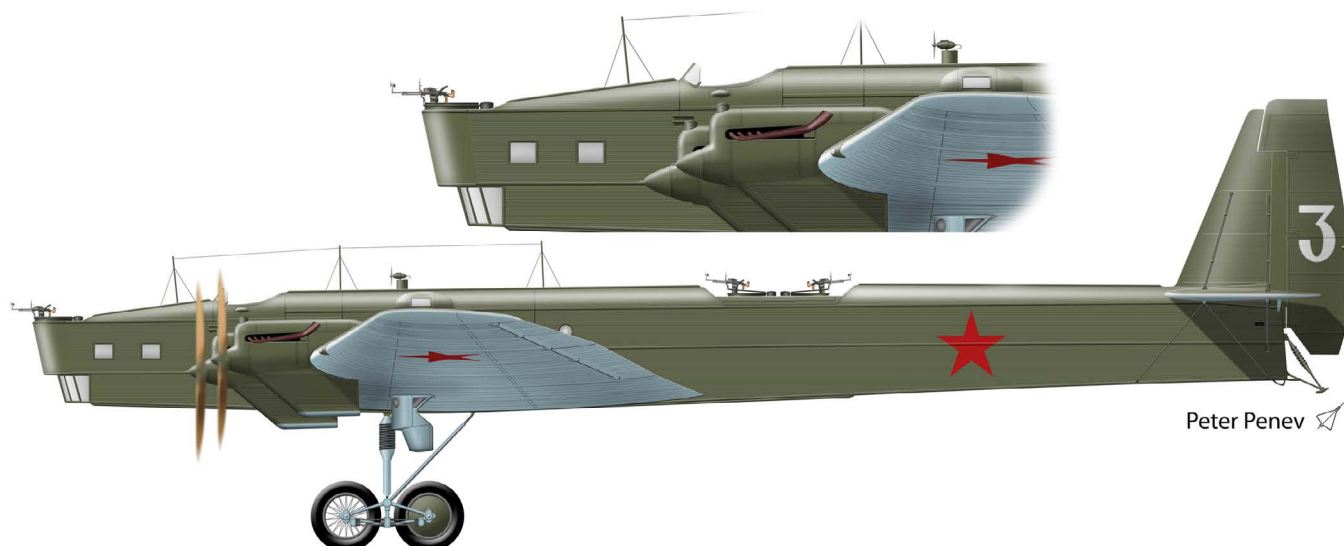
This Japanese Private 2nd class is shown wearing the Showa 5 summer uniform with the Green Ersatz cap, khaki-green puttees and Showa 5 boots. His gear includes the Type 30 belt, canvas pouches for grenades, Type-94 canteen and canvas carrier, 1932-pattern haversack and the Showa 5 rucksack. He also carries a Type-90 helmet, and in his hands is the 50mm Type-89 grenade discharger. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



The Nakajima Ki-27, also known as the Type 97 Army Fighter, was the first Japanese Army Air Corps monoplane fighter. For its time, this fighter was fast (460km/h at 3,500 metres), and also extremely nimble thanks to its light construction. Of course, this implied a lack of robustness. The Ki-27 was armed with a pair of Type 89 7.7mm machine guns. Depicted here is a Ki-27 of the 59th Sentai. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)



The Polikarpov I-16 fighter was designed in 1934 and was extremely innovative for its time, being a monoplane with a retractable undercarriage. VVS I-16s were involved in the Lake Khasan battle, flying escort missions for the bombers. They did not become involved in any air combat as the Japanese abstained from engaging their own air force. However, several Soviet fighters were shot down by enemy anti-aircraft artillery whilst making strafing runs. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)



The Tupolev TB-3 was a heavy bomber designed in 1929 and entered service in the VVS in 1932. This four-engine monoplane could carry 3 tons of bombs over 2,000 km. From the end of 1933, 143 of these aircraft, forming three brigades, were deployed in the Far East. Because of their ability to strike major Japanese cities, they acted as a kind of strategic deterrent. (Artwork by Peter Penev)



General plan of the Battle of Lake Khasan, 29 July–13 August 1938. The landscape of the area has been significantly reshaped since the late 1930s. (Map by Tom Cooper)

and some five tanks. Most companies were equipped with a mix of medium and light tanks whilst some had only light tanks. According to the IJA doctrine, a tank regiment was foremost designed to be embedded in a division and attach one of its tank companies to each infantry regiment. New regiments continued to be raised and by 1939, the Army had nine tank regiments.

TABLE 2: IJA Tank Regiments

Regiment	Notes
3rd Tank Regiment	Raised in 1933 as 3rd Battalion
4th Tank Regiment	Former 4th Battalion
5th Tank Regiment	Raised in 1938 as a new unit as the 5th Tank Battalion was dissolved
7th Tank Regiment	Raised in 1933 as 1st Tank Battalion, renumbered thereafter
8th Tank Regiment	Raised in 1933 as 2nd Tank Battalion, renumbered thereafter
9th Tank Regiment	Raised in 1939
12th Tank Regiment	Raised in 1939
13th Tank Regiment	Raised in 1939
14th Tank Regiment	Raised in 1939

In 1934, the Kwantung Army went a step further and activated the 1st Independent Mixed Brigade, also known as the Kungchuling Mixed Mechanized Brigade. This was intended as a combined mechanized force and it controlled the 3rd and 4th Tank Regiments, a motorised infantry regiment, a motorised artillery battalion with 12 Type 90 Field Guns and an engineer company. The unit was engaged in northern China once the war erupted but met with countless difficulties, mainly because the engineer company was completely insufficient to deal with the lack of good communication infrastructure. Even worse, the brigade found itself divided into numerous smaller detachments which were allocated to infantry

formations and found itself reduced to an infantry-supporting role and was dissolved thereafter. With this, the IJA lost the opportunity to develop an early mechanized warfare doctrine and similar attempts were resumed only a few years later, once the German Wehrmacht had demonstrated to all the potential of armoured warfare.¹¹

Thus, the IJA was by the end of the 1930s a unique force, whose doctrine relied foremost on an extremely aggressive mindset and which bet almost everything on its infantry to win decisive victories. The latter was indeed a formidable force and would prove so repeatedly in China, but also on the various fronts it was engaged in during the Pacific War, proving itself able to manoeuvre through seemingly impossible terrain at amazing speed as well as to pose almost invariably fanatical defence even in the direst situations. However, the IJA was also outmatched in every other aspect of modern warfare compared to other first rank armies. Its artillery lacked both numbers and firepower, whilst its armoured force was ill-suited both in terms of doctrine and equipment to wage war against a strong opponent. Anti-tank capabilities were also weak with a mere 24 small guns for a square division. Furthermore, the IJA commanders showed an almost endemic disdain for “beans and bullets” and thus demonstrated again and again a propensity to initiate large operations on a logistical shoestring, luring themselves into overenthusiastic planning whilst underestimating the gargantuan needs of modern warfare, noticeably in terms of ammunition expenditure. However, it could also be argued that Japanese high-ranking officers did not have any other choice to make the best out of a virtually impossible strategic calculus. Indeed, Japan, a country whose industrial capability was roughly similar to countries such as Italy, had made the choice of simultaneously possessing a navy expected to fight against the USA and an army geared for war against the Soviet Union, thus guaranteeing that it would prove unable to provide the necessary resources for either, despite squeezing the economy almost dry even before the Pacific War began.

3 COLLISION COURSE

The Japanese occupation of Manchuria had an immense impact on Moscow’s strategic situation, as all of a sudden the two countries found themselves with a roughly 4,000 kilometre-long border in common, whilst Manchukuo also shared a 700 kilometre border with the Mongolian People’s Republic, a Soviet vassal. For Moscow, to have the Imperial Japanese Army on its doorstep was of course an entirely different proposition than the Young Marshal’s troops. Furthermore, the central position of Manchuria made it a perfect launch pad for attacks against the Soviet Far East. Due to its sheer size, it was extremely difficult to defend and was dependent upon a single main communication artery, the Trans-Siberian Railway, which was both limited in capability and extremely vulnerable due to long stretches which followed the borders. Last but not least, the general backwardness of the region made it difficult to sustain large concentrations of troops.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union was still in the process of rebuilding itself after the devastation suffered during the Civil War. By the early 1930s, the Soviet Union still saw itself in a position of

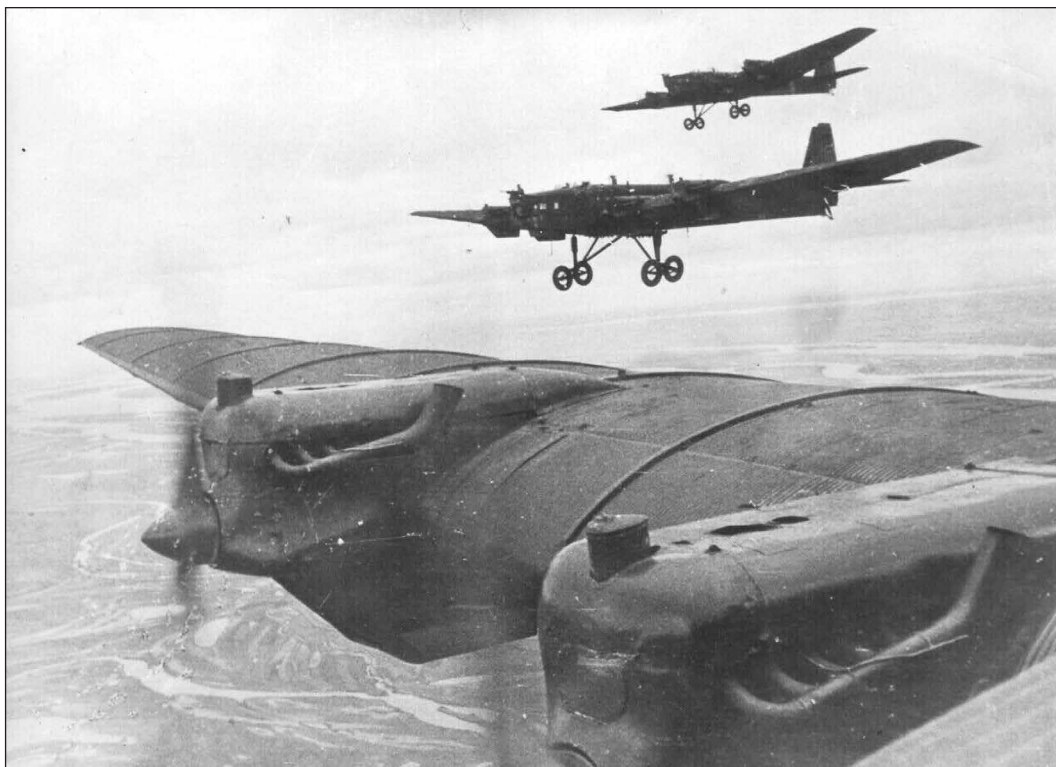
extreme vulnerability, being the only communist state surrounded by a number of potentially hostile countries. This of course became even worst once the Nazis took over Germany in 1933. Thus, Moscow’s stance after the invasion of Manchuria was to follow a strategy of appeasement in order to avoid an all-out war with Japan. Indeed, in December 1931, the Soviets even proposed a non-aggression pact with Tokyo, but this was refused by the Japanese. Indeed, a number of high-ranking IJA officers were advocating to make the most of Soviet weakness and to launch a war at the earliest opportunity. For once cooler heads in the AGS and the Army prevailed, and the project was abandoned in 1933. The Soviets nonetheless continued to follow a double-track policy; on the one hand, they continued to appease the Japanese and even agreed to sell to the Manchukuoan state their rights over the Chinese Eastern Railways in 1935, whilst on the other hand, they reinforced their Far East defences as fast as they could.

The First Five Year Plan included a series of major investments in the Far East to develop its infrastructure and production capabilities,

which were in return to allow for the presence of much stronger army forces. Notably, the Trans-Siberian Railway was double tracked, thus decreasing markedly the time needed to dispatch forces from the west if requested. Four fortified areas, consisting of several lines of concrete pillboxes were also gradually built to cover the easiest avenues of invasion from Manchuria, whilst the number of rifle divisions in the Far East rose from nine in 1933 to an estimated 16 in 1936 and 20 in 1937. These were supported by fast-rising numbers of tanks and aircraft. Indeed, IJA intelligence assessed that by 1934, around 500 aircraft were based in the southern Maritime Province alone, and these included around 170 TB-3 heavy bombers able to reach the main Japanese cities, including Tokyo. Three years after its reactivation in 1932, the Soviet Pacific Fleet was also assessed to control 20 submarines and these were an obvious threat for Japanese maritime lines of communication. In turn, this build-up gradually began to be perceived as a threat by Tokyo until 1937, when the Kwantung Army was reinforced with the allocation of two divisions which added to the three already under its control since 1934.¹

Border Incidents

To make matters worse, the borders between Manchukuo and the Soviet Union were often ill-defined and large parts of these were contested one way or another, thus giving much scope for a myriad of border incidents; the Japanese and the Manchukuoan authorities reported 152 of these between 1932 and 1934. Most remained minor or insignificant but nonetheless fuelled an atmosphere of tension and uneasiness between the two powers. Worse still, much more serious affairs occurred from time to time. In June 1935, an IJA squad opened fire against a six-strong NKVD patrol west of Lake Khasan, killing one of the latter. In October of the same year, a mixed Manchukuoan-Japanese platoon exchanged fire with a Soviet force of similar size 20 kilometres north of Suifenho; two Japanese and four Manchukuoan were killed as a result. The next major issue came at the end of January 1936, when



The appearance of the TB-3 heavy bombers in the Soviet Far East acted as a deterrent as Japan's main cities were within their range and deemed highly vulnerable to air attacks because most of their buildings were of wooden construction. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The Soviet submarine ShCh-117, part of the Pacific Fleet. The build-up of the Pacific Fleet's submarine force was also a source of concern for a maritime nation such as Japan. (Open source)

around 100 Manchukuoan Army soldiers killed their officers and deserted before fleeing towards the border to escape their pursuers. The Soviets allowed them to cross the border and granted them asylum, thus incensing both Japanese and Manchukuoans. In March of the next year, NKVD soldiers ambushed a Korea Army patrol on the border between Korea and the Soviet Union, leading to further skirmishes the same day between the reinforcements sent by both sides. Invariably however, these incidents were defused by rounds of negotiations between the two nations' diplomats which usually



A Type 94 AT gun in battery, similar to those used to sink one Soviet gunboat and disable a second on 30 June 1937. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

succeeded in preventing any escalation but failed to lead to any long-term agreement.

Something much worse took place in summer 1937. On 19 June, locals reported that Soviet troops supported by gunboats had occupied the contested islets of Kanchatzu and Chinamho on the Amur River whilst the following day, a team of Manchukuoan policemen sent to investigate were repulsed by small arms fire. Once informed, General Tojo Hideki, Chief of Staff Kwantung Army, dispatched the 49th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, to the scene with orders to launch a night attack to recapture Kanchatzu. The AGS however countermanded the order to avoid an escalation to the great frustration of Kwantung Army officers. However, on the afternoon of 30 June 1937, three Soviet gunboats sailed near the Manchoukoan side of the Amur River and troops of the 49th Infantry Regiment reacted by opening up with machine gun fire, soon followed by a pair of 37mm guns from the regimental AT company, sinking one of the ships and disabling a second. Thirty-seven Soviet sailors were killed in the engagement, including several who were swimming away from their sinking ship and were mercilessly machine gunned. Moscow did however prove as willing as the AGS or the Japanese Cabinet to avoid escalation and agreed to withdraw its soldiers from Kanchatzu, although two days later – on 6 July – Manchukoan soldiers occupied the islet.²

RKKA

The RKKA (Raboche-Krest'yanski Krasnoi Armiiy, Workers and Peasants Red Army) was created on 15 January 1918, just a few months after the beginning of the Russian Revolution. From the onset, it was designed as a political army; formal ranks were abolished and all leaders were known only by their positions until the mid-1930s, whilst the recruitment of hundreds of thousands of former Tsarist army cadres and specialists enticed the creation of a

parallel chain of command with political commissars attached to – and controlling – virtually all units. At the end of the Civil War, the triumphant Red Army had turned into a five million man strong, but poorly-trained and poorly-armed, behemoth which was also unsustainable for a devastated country such as Russia.

Accordingly, the RKKA was swiftly and massively downsized and only 529,865 men were left by October 1924, although its new organisation was designed to allow for a fast expansion if needed. To achieve this, the Soviets had opted for a mixed force structure with

regular and territorial forces. Of the 77 rifle divisions in existence in early 1925, 31 were regulars and kept at roughly a third of their war strength whilst the 46 other divisions were territorial units which were kept at 16 percent of their war strength at best.⁴ In 1928, German intelligence assessed that regular divisions could be fully mobilised in six days and territorial divisions in between 10 and 12 days. Rifle divisions were organised into three rifle regiments supported by an artillery regiment and various other units, including a cavalry squadron for reconnaissance duties. At the same time, the RKKA also included 11 cavalry divisions, all regular units except one that was territorial, and these were maintained at 60 percent of their wartime strength. This order of battle did not evolve much during the following years as in 1930, the Soviet Army still included 70 rifle divisions and 13 cavalry divisions. This, obviously, was not much to defend such a politically isolated and gigantic country.⁵

Doctrinal Innovation

All through the 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet Union saw the development of a new concept which would later become known as the Operational Art. A series of military thinkers such as Aleksandr A. Svechin, Sergey S. Kamenev, Vladimir K. Triandafillov and Mikhael N. Tukhachevsky came to the conclusion that, as the First World War had shown, future wars could not be expected to be decided in single decisive campaigns or even more so battles, and that much more was needed. Furthermore, these Soviet thinkers were also influenced by the nature of the Eastern Front experience against the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, as well as the Russian Civil War, where, because of the immensity of the theatres of operations, manoeuvre warfare was not “killed” by firepower to the same extent as it was on the Western Front with its almost unbreachable and continuous trench-lines. Furthermore, the cooperation with the German military that followed the signature

of the Rapallo Treaty in 1922 and the opening of the German training and development bases of Kazan, Lipetsk and Tomka, dedicated to tanks, the air force and chemical weapons respectively, exposed the Soviet officers to the latest German

TABLE 3: RKKA Officer Ranks 1938³

Abbreviation	Full denomination	equivalent
Komandarm	Komandir Armia (Army Commander) (First or second rank)	Colonel General or Lieutenant General
Komkor	Komandir Korpus (Corps Commander)	Lieutenant General
Komdiv	Komandir Diviziya (Division Commander)	Major General
Kombrig	Komandir Brigada (Brigade Commander)	Brigadier General

theories and doctrines, as well as with their early experiments linked to mechanised and air warfare.

Thanks to all of this, Soviet military theoreticians came to the conclusion that the simple accumulation of tactical operations was insufficient and thus conceptualised an operational level which was to act as the link between strategy and tactics. This implied the conduct of operations in sequence in order to reach the desired strategic effects. In turn, these operations were necessarily to be offensive in nature and conducted into the enemy depth, thus giving birth to the Deep Battle and later on, Deep Operation concepts. Indeed, the 1929 Field Service Regulations already emphasised manoeuvre and offensive warfare as key to the RKKA doctrine, and large units were to seek to break the front, penetrate the enemy depth to as much as 250 kilometres and then encircle and destroy them, before repeating the whole undertaking again. The 1936 version of the same document went further and formalised the conduct of Deep Battle as instrumental in gaining successes.

Of course, these concepts were bound to remain just that until the RKKA both defined and acquired the means to conduct such gigantic and fast-paced mobile operations. By the late 1920s however, these had already been identified as a combination of mechanised forces, cavalry, aircraft and paratroopers tasked with breaking through and manoeuvre toward the enemy depth and opening the way for the rifle divisions which were to follow in their wake.⁶ Nonetheless, by 1929, the RKKA was in this regard at least a decade ahead of an army such as the IJA.

Stalin's Forges

In 1928, Moscow launched its First Five Year Plan which concentrated on accelerated industrialisation and allowed, although at a devastating human cost, spectacular results such as the increase of pig iron production from 3,282,000 tons in 1928 to 4,964,000 tons in 1930, or that of tractor production from 1,300 vehicles in 1928 to 48,900 in 1932. The first quinquennial plan was immediately followed by a second, which emphasised military production and allowed for a massive influx of new weapons deliveries to the RKKA. Thus, whilst 1,911 artillery pieces, 740 tanks and 860 aircraft were produced on average during the years 1930 and 1931, these numbers rose to 5,020, 3,139 and 3,578 respectively between 1935 and 1937. This equipment was instrumental in allowing the Soviet Army not only to discard its older equipment but also to expand massively; by 1935, its peacetime establishment included 90 rifle and 16 cavalry divisions, supplemented by a wide array of various units including 100 light- and at least 30 heavy artillery regiments. Simultaneously, the RKKA was also gradually converting its territorial units into regular ones, giving it a strength of almost one million men. In 1935, formal ranks were re-established for junior and middle-ranking officers whilst the same year, a General Staff, intended to become the brain of the army came into being, followed the next year by the opening of a General Staff Academy.

Artillery remained a Russian forte, with the Soviets continuing to produce ever larger quantities of modernised models from Tsarist times, such as the ML-20 152mm Gun-Howitzer. Much more modern designs came also into being, such as the M-30 122mm Howitzer, the F-22 76.2mm Divisional Gun or A-19 122mm Gun, and further enhanced the RKKA artillery branch's capabilities. Furthermore, the Soviets created virtually from zero a gigantic tank industry. Indeed, the MS-1, the first indigenous tank, was introduced only in 1927 and was just a refinement of the French FT-17 design. This was followed by the BA-27 armoured car which entered production in 1928, and then the T-24 tank as

well as the T-19 and T-20 tankettes, thus providing the RKKA with its first generation of locally produced armoured vehicles, albeit in limited quantities. Soviet design bureaux then fast-tracked their skills' improvement thanks to the acquisition of several foreign designs from firms such as Vickers or the US Wheel Track Layer Corporation, which gave them access in the latter case to the highly innovative concepts developed by John Walter Christie. This influx of foreign technologies allowed Soviet designers to create several new tanks in quick succession dedicated to provide direct support for the rifle units, such as the T-26 light tank or the T-28 heavy tank, or intended specifically for mobile operations, such as the BT (*Bystrokhodny Tank*: Fast Tank) series. From 1932 on, Soviet factories were producing around 3,000 armoured vehicles per year, whilst the equally fast-expanding automotive industry production rose from 2,750 vehicles in 1929 to 41,000 in 1935, thus giving the RKKA the tools it needed to turn its innovative doctrine into reality; raising an airborne force, and much more importantly, a mechanized force of unheard of size and capability.⁷

The first experiments with paratroopers took place in August 1930 when two sections were dropped by three R-1 aircraft during field manoeuvres. A number of similar exercises during the following years took place to hone the new arm and on 11 December 1932, a first airborne brigade, combining a paratrooper battalion, a motorised battalion and an artillery battalion, together with an air transport group, was raised. By early 1934, the airborne force included this single brigade as well as 29 airborne battalions, most of these attached to rifle corps, as well as four motorised aviation detachments for a total of 10,000 men. Another two brigades and six regiments were activated two years later, and in 1938 the RKKA concentrated its airborne units into the 201st, 202nd, 204th, 211th, 212th and 214th Airborne Brigades, all tasked with supporting deep penetrations by ground forces by launching large-scale operations behind the enemy rear, and thus providing the Soviets with a so far unique capability.⁸

Motor-Mechanisation

Similar developments occurred with the armoured forces, but on a gigantic scale. In 1927, the RKKA had only a single tank regiment, followed two years later by an experimental mechanized regiment. In 1930, four new tank regiments were raised together with a first experimental mechanized brigade. The latter included a tank regiment with a motorised infantry regiment, supported by an artillery battalion and a reconnaissance battalion, with a total of 60 tanks, 32 tankettes, 17 armoured cars and 264 trucks.

This first brigade was the prototype for further units designed to operate independently as combined forces. Several major steps were taken in 1932 with the opening of the Stalin Academy of the Mechanisation and Motorisation of the Red Army, the activation of five independent mechanized brigades, two tank and 12 mechanized regiments, another 15 tank and four mechanized battalions and 65 tankette battalions and the creation of two mechanized corps, the 11th and 45th. By early 1935, each of these had two mechanized brigades, one machine gun brigade as well as one reconnaissance battalion and one signal battalion with an inventory of 463 tanks and tankettes, including 348 BT tanks, 20 guns and 1,444 vehicles with 8,965 men and officers. These were followed in 1936 by another two corps, the 5th and 7th. Together, these four units alone gave the RKKA an armoured fist unrivalled anywhere else in the world.

Roughly at that time the Soviets also opted to constitute two other distinct types of units with tank brigades directly attached to a central tank reserve and intended to be concentrated specifically

for breakthrough operations, as well as a vast array of tank or mechanized regiments, battalions and companies intended to be part of rifle and cavalry units and support these. The brigades' organisation was standardised over time. Tank brigades controlled four tank battalions with 32 tanks each, for a total of 128 machines. Mechanised brigades were made up of three tank battalions, one light tank battalion, one machine gun battalion (in essence a motorised infantry battalion), one combat support battalion and one repair battalion, as well as a company each of transport, signal and reconnaissance troops, with a total of 2,754 men, 145 tanks, 28 armoured cars and 521 other vehicles. Motor-mechanized brigades were almost identical but replaced one of the tank battalions with a second machine gun battalion.

All of this set the path for a massive increase of the RKKA armoured forces which by 1936 included four mechanized corps, four heavy tank brigades and 15 independent mechanized or motor-mechanized brigades.

Another 83 tank battalions or companies were embedded in rifle divisions, whilst two years earlier, 14 mechanized regiments and another five mechanized battalions had been attached to the cavalry. Furthermore, the Soviets intended to expand their armoured force even further and intended to include by early 1938 25 mechanized, motor-mechanized and tank brigades in total. However, this armoured phalanx was not immune from several flaws. Most of the units were badly understrength, whilst maintenance standards remained poor due to lack of qualified mechanics and engineers on the one hand and also because on the other hand industry lagged behind in providing the RKKA with the immense amounts of spare parts it needed to operate its fleet of vehicles. Furthermore, field manoeuvres showed time and again how difficult it was to wield and sustain such massive mechanized formations, especially as radios were lacking both in numbers and quality.¹⁰

Great Terror

With international tensions rising, Stalin and his closer associates determined to purge the country of any suspected anti-Soviet elements in order to avoid a collapse of the same nature as eventually destroyed the Tsarist regime during the previous World War. From the mid-1930s on, the Soviet Union became engulfed in successive waves of merciless purges which were further aggravated by the organs of repression falling into a state of virtual frenzy with the smallest of suspicions being more than enough to get virtually

TABLE 4 The RKKA's major units early 1938⁹

Type of units	Number of units	Notes
Mechanized Corps	4	5th, 7th, 11th, 45th (5th and 7th were raised in 1934, the 11th and 45th in 1932)
Rifle Corps	27	
Cavalry Corps	7	
Rifle Divisions	106	71 regular and 35 territorial
Cavalry Divisions	32	
Motor-Mechanized, Mechanized and Tank Brigades	26	Including eight mechanized brigades attached to the mechanized corps



Soldiers taking an oath in 1919, at a time when the RKKA was struggling to organise itself whilst facing multiple enemies. (Open source)

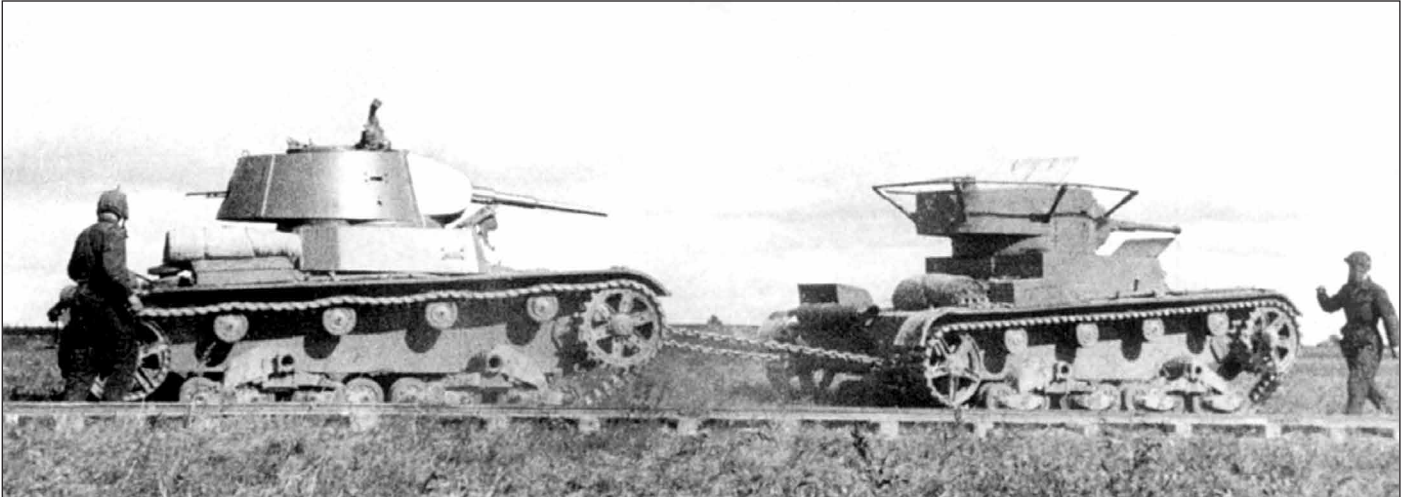


Mikhael N. Tukhachevsky was one among the few strategists at the forefront of Soviet doctrinal innovation, although in hindsight, the resulting doctrine might have been too far ahead of the country's resources at the time. (Open source)

anyone arrested, detained, deported or executed, causing the death of an estimated 700,000 citizens. Unsurprisingly, the RKKA became a target of choice for Stalin's executioners, foremost the NKVD, as the regime had always feared "Bonapartism", that is the emergence of powerful military leaders able to topple it. The announcement on



A BT-7 fast tank. These were designed for exploitation and were able to move both on their tracks and on their wheels.(Albert Grandolini Collection)



A pair of T-26 tanks, with one towing the other. These were intended for infantry support and developed from Vickers designs imported in the early 1930s. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

12 June 1937 of the execution of Marshal Tukhachevsky and eight other RKKA top commanders not only stunned the country but marked the beginning of a decimation of the army cadres which was to last for another two years. The number of RKKA members tried thus skyrocketed from 3,816 in 1936 to 8,681 in 1937 and 8,360 in 1938, whilst a total of 34,000 officers were discharged between 1937 and 1938.

The Great Terror had devastating effects on the RKKA for several distinct reasons, the most obvious being that a large portion of the officer corps disappeared at a time when the army was fast expanding, thus causing the need to hastily train new officers to fill the gaps. Worse however was that the purges proved particularly deadly for high-ranking officers; 60 corps commanders out of 67, 136 division commanders out of 199 and 221 brigade commanders out of 397 were eliminated. It was virtually impossible to make do on short notice for such a massive loss of experience. With the purges, virtually the entire generation which was on the verge on transforming the RKKA into allegedly the first among world armies due to the combination of its sheer size and its extremely innovative



Marshall Vasili K. Blyukher, head of the OKVDA for nearly a decade. (Mil. ru/Open source)

doctrine disappeared all of a sudden. Furthermore, cohesiveness among the entire institution crumbled because of the climate of fear and suspicion instilled by the blind repression and this unsurprisingly triggered a general loss of discipline, a surge of desertion rates and a significant lowering of the already lacking Soviet training standards, especially so in technically-intensive branches.

Another side effect of the purges was the emergence of new, much more conservative military leaders, who, drawing the wrong conclusions from the Soviet tankers' experiences when deployed in Spain, where their vehicles had proven vulnerable to enemy anti-tank and artillery fire, backtracked on the Deep Battle and Deep Operations doctrines. Tanks were increasingly reassigned to infantry support roles, with the process leading to the eventual dissolution of the mechanised corps in 1939 and their replacement by a larger number of smaller motorised divisions designed to support rifle units rather than operate independently in the enemy rear. Thus, the RKKA, which had been at the doctrinal forefront of mechanised combined arms warfare for almost a decade, swiftly lost its advance over other armies, foremost the German Wehrmacht.¹¹

OKVDA

At the end of 1922, and once the Soviets were again in control of the region, the military forces in the Far East were placed under a single command; the Far Eastern Region. To prepare for the looming war with the Young Marshal's forces, the Soviets activated a new command on 7 August 1929, the Otdelnaya Krasnoznamennaya Dalyanevostochnaya Armiya (Separate Far Eastern Red Banner Army; OKVDA).¹²

The OKVDA was initially centred around the 19th and 18th Rifle Corps with two rifle divisions and a cavalry brigade each, soon reinforced by another two divisions, and placed under the command of Vasili Konstantinovich Blyukher. Blyukher, a Siberian old hand who had also served as military adviser to the KMT between 1924 and 1927, was to lead the new command for almost a decade, virtually tailor-making it to deal with the peculiarities of the Soviet Far East, noticeably by adding as many cavalry and motorised formations as he could to his army. He also approved the creation of a Special Kolkhoz Corps by settling reservists in collective farms in the OKVDA area of responsibility, thus building-up at the time a reserve of roughly 100,000 trained men living off the land and available at short notice if needed. The OKVDA remained at the same strength with its two corps controlling six rifle divisions, four of them territorials, two cavalry brigades and various other units, such as the 9th Armoured Train Division, by the end of 1931. Unsurprisingly, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria changed this all of a sudden and triggered a gradual influx of reinforcements during the following years. By March 1935, the OKVDA included 14 rifle divisions, at least two cavalry divisions, the 11th Mechanized Corps, and a Special Construction Corps established in 1933 and dedicated to build up the 11 fortified regions intended to protect the borders. Another 40,000 troops from the NKVD border forces were also garrisoned in the Far East.

TABLE 5: Known OKVDA Divisions, 1933¹³

Division	Location
1st Pacific Rifle Division	Vladivostok
2nd Amur Rifle Division	Blagoveshchensk
12th Sibrevkom Rifle Division	Khabarovsk
21st Rifle Division	

26th Rifle Division	Nikolsk-Ussuriisk
35th Rifle Division	
36th Rifle Division	Chita
40th Rifle Division	
57th Rifle Division	
5th Cavalry Division	

The build-up continued unabated thereafter and the number of OKVDA rifle and cavalry divisions reached 20 and three respectively by the end of 1937, for a total of 170,000 regular troops (without counting the reservists of the Kolkhoz Corps), with around 900 tanks. All of this was despite the establishment of the Trans-Baikal Military District which became a separate command in February 1937 and took over control of the garrisons stationed there. Whilst impressive, the reinforcement of the Far Eastern forces remained relative, showing that Moscow continued to place a much greater emphasis on the defence of Western Russia.¹⁴

The Great Terror however devastated the OKVDA as much as the rest of the RKKA, with up to 40 percent of the cadres up to the regimental level being purged, whilst this proportion rose to at least 70 percent among officers serving in divisional, corps or army staff, thus gutting the whole Far Eastern forces' command structure. After months of relentless purges by the NKVD and in the aftermath of the Lake Khashan Battle, Blyukher himself was arrested in October 1938 and executed. In the meantime, the OKVDA, rebaptised for a time the Far Eastern Front, was dismembered into two separate commands; the 1st and 2nd Red Banner Armies, in charge of the Ussuri and Amur areas respectively, with the 57th Special Rifle Corps, then stationed in Mongolia. The Trans-Baikal Military District remained autonomous.¹⁵

Genghis Khan's Heirs

A peculiarity of Moscow's stance in the Far East was the status of Outer Mongolia which in the early 1920s had become a Soviet client state in all but name.

The RKKA's intervention there in 1921 to defeat the infamous Baron Roman Fyodorovich von Ungern-Sternberg led to the proclamation of the Mongolian People's Republic on 26 November 1924 by Soviet-supported local communists of the Mongolian People's Party. During the subsequent years, the Mongolian People's Party unleashed a series of brutal reforms to reshuffle their country along the Soviet model, including repeated crackdowns on the extremely influential Buddhist clergy and a collectivisation of agriculture, thus triggering a series of uprisings which were suppressed by the army. With a population of 800,000 and an economy centred on agriculture and cattle-raising, Ulan Bator remained heavily dependent on Moscow's support and therefore, control.

By the mid-1930s, following vicious infighting among the Mongolian People's Party hierarchs, Khorloogiin Choibalsan, a particularly ruthless character, became the country's indisputable leader and launched a series of purges with the support of both Stalin and the NKVD, which killed at least 1,000 party and government cadres and thousands more in the population at large. The monks' communities in particular were decimated. The army proved no exception and numbers of officers were arrested or killed after the discovery of an alleged anti-Soviet plot.

The new Mongol People's Republic invested heavily from the outset into building up the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Army (MPRA) which expanded from 4,000 men in 1924 to 17,000 in 1927. This growth was fuelled by relying on conscription with the draftees



Well equipped and uniformed, this group of MPRA soldiers man a DP-28 LMG. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



This Soviet crew of the 57th KON poses in front of this BA armoured car. These vehicles were particularly well-armed thanks to their 45mm gun which allowed them to engage enemy armour. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Khorloogiin Choibalsan in 1939. Ruthless, he was often described as the "Stalin of Mongolia". (Albert Grandolini Collection)

submitted to two years of military service. From the mid-1930s on, the Army expanded again with the military service duration being expanded to three years in 1937, whilst the following year, Ulan Bator was spending 52.7 percent of the government budget on its military, which included at least 20,000 men in 1939.

Unsurprisingly, the MPRA remained in essence a cavalry force and was structured in two corps controlling a total of eight cavalry divisions and a single armoured brigade. Denominations were, however, misleading as these "divisions", numbered from 1 to 8, had nominally 1,591 men and were in turn divided between two cavalry regiments with two cavalry and one mounted machine gun squadron, each supported by a battalion of 18 BA-27, BA-6 and FAI armoured cars in two squadrons, artillery (eight M1902 and M1927 76mm guns and six M1932 45mm anti-tank guns) and signals. However, this remained theoretical as several units did not have all the required equipment, although the MPRA received, for instance, eight BA-27s in 1930 and 15 FAI as well as 35 BA-6 armoured cars in 1936. Furthermore, the MPRA was a virtual extension of the RKKA, and entirely equipped with Soviet weapons and equipment, whilst Soviet advisers were running the show almost everywhere, with apparently devastating results for the Army's effectiveness

and morale. According to one Soviet officer serving in Mongolia who defected to Manchukuo in 1938 and related his experience to the Japanese:

The Mongolian Army is rather dissatisfied with the Soviet attitude and with the irrational actions of Russian military advisers. The Soviet military assistance advisory bureau has powers of life or death over the MPRA, and Sovietisation is handled by the Russian Minister to Mongolia and by the military assistance advisory bureau chief and the approximately 100 officers stationed with units. It is said that relations between the advisers and commanders at the local-unit level are quite bad, which constitute a source of anti-Soviet feeling in the Mongolian Army. The MPRA officers are ostensibly loyal to the USSR, for self-protection, but covertly most of them seem to nurture different feelings.¹⁶

Accordingly, the Soviets assessed the MPRA units as much less effective than their RKKA counterparts, whilst the Japanese considered them as fit foremost for small unit operations and overall of similar quality as Manchukuoan formations.¹⁷

Birth of the 57th Special Assignment Corps

From 1932 on, the Japanese presence in Manchuria also drastically increased the strategic value of the People's Republic of Mongolia



Japanese engineers studying a Polikarpov I-16 fighter captured from the Nationalists. (Open source)



Soviet officers of the 57th KON together with a MPRA officer. Despite appearances, relations between the two forces were tense. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

because it acted as a bulwark. From Moscow's perspective, a Japanese takeover of Mongolia would have allowed the IJA to strike directly at the Trans-Baikal Military District and sever the connections linking Far Eastern Russia from the rest of the country, thus placing the OKDVA in a hopeless position. Accordingly, on 27 November 1934, Moscow and Ulan Bator concluded a mutual assistance agreement, whilst in January 1935 small RKKA contingents were deployed

in Mongolia. The following year, a series of border incidents erupted between Manchukuoans, Mongolians and Japanese detachments, culminating in the Tauran or Buir Nor incident, when the IJA deployed to the border a motorised infantry battalion from the 1st Independent Mixed Brigade reinforced with a tankette company. On 31 March 1936, the unit was attacked by Mongolian and Soviet aircraft, several of which were damaged by small arms fire, and then fought with an MPRA cavalry regiment supported by 10 armoured cars and artillery. The motorised

battalion was forced to withdraw after losing several tankettes and 11 men killed.

Meanwhile, on 12 March 1936, a new Mutual Assistance Pact was concluded between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of Mongolia, with both sides committing to provide military assistance to the other in case of a foreign aggression against one of them and thus making certain that any large-scale clash of Manchukuoan or Japanese forces with Mongolian troops would automatically draw-in the RKKA.

In September 1937, the RKKA activated the 57th KON (Korpus Osobogo Naznacheniya, Special Assignment Corps) to control all the units deployed in Mongolia. The formation's HQ was in Ulan Bator and was attached to the Trans-Baikal Military District and initially included the 18th and 90th Cavalry Regiments, the 32nd Mechanised and the 7th Motor-Mechanised Brigade, as well as two ad hoc motor-mechanised units. The 57th KON was massively reinforced thereafter with the arrival of the 36th Motorised Rifle Division at the end of 1938. Correspondingly, by spring 1939, the corps had grown into a rather powerful, but still compact, mobile force, with one motorised rifle division, one tank brigade, one cavalry brigade and three motor-mechanised brigades. The latter in turn consisted of one battalion each of armour, rifle machine gun, reconnaissance and smaller support units, for a total of 1,888 men, 82 armoured cars, 10 guns and 320 other vehicles. By then, the 57th KON had 27,500 men, 284 tanks, 370 other armoured vehicles and 200 guns of calibre greater than 45mm.¹⁸ A major flaw of the Soviet military expeditionary corps in Mongolia was an abyssal lack of cooperation with MPRA units, at least according to the same defector:

Although there is a bit of fraternisation among high-ranking officers, the two armies are isolated from each other. The NKVD is always watching, and when associations are too frequent the NKVD always intervenes. The isolation and the vigilance are for security purposes, which shows that the Russians do not fully trust the MPRA.¹⁹

Operation Zet

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the subsequent escalation of the latter into an all-out war between Japan and China was viewed almost with delight by the Soviet leaders. All of a sudden,

TABLE 6: 57th KON, Spring 1939²⁰		
Units	Location	Notes
HQ	Ulan Bator	CO Komdiv N.V. Feklenko
36th Motorised Rifle Division	Soin Shanda	CO Major I.P. Dorofeev. 24th, 76th and 149th Motorised Rifle Regiments, 175th Artillery Regiment, one tank battalion.
6th Cavalry Brigade	Yugodzyr	143rd and 155th Cavalry Regiments, 39th Horse Artillery Regiment
11th Tank Brigade	Undur Khan	CO Kombrig M.P. Yakovlev. 16th, 24th, 45th Tank Battalions, 175th Rifle Machine Gun Battalion, 354th Artillery Battalion, 335th Automobile Battalion
7th Motor-Mechanized Brigade	Dzamin-Ude	CO Major A.A. Lesovoy. 247th Armoured Battalion, 161st Rifle Machine Gun Battalion, 204th Reconnaissance Battalion
8th Motor-Mechanized Brigade	Bain-Tumen	CO Colonel V.A. Mishulin. 234th Armoured Battalion, 164th Tank Battalion, 171st Rifle Machine Gun Battalion, 223rd Reconnaissance Battalion
9th Motor-Mechanized Brigade	Ulan Bator	CO Colonel S.I. Oleynikov. 241st Armoured Battalion, 196th Rifle Machine Gun Battalion, 240th Reconnaissance Battalion

their nemesis in the Far East had engulfed itself into a quagmire of gigantic proportions and lost the ability to launch any full-scale attack against the Soviet Union, and this precisely at a time when the RKKA was affected by the first waves of purges which were beginning to decimate its officer corps. Unsurprisingly, the Soviet stance toward Japan began to be less compromising. In a matter of weeks, Moscow decided to make the most of the opportunity by supporting the KMT resistance on a massive scale in order to get the Japanese stuck in China as long as possible, with Stalin himself announcing to Chinese Special Envoy Sun Fo that:

China was fighting Russia's battle as well as her own; that it was the ultimate objective of the Japanese to capture the whole of Siberia as far as Lake Baikal; that China would continue to receive all possible help from Russia in the form of munitions, aircraft and other supplies; that the Soviet Union would not, however, intervene in the war.²¹

On 21 August 1937, Nanking and Moscow signed a Mutual Non-aggression Treaty and this was followed by the visit of a Chinese military delegation to the Soviet Union. Before long, a massive influx of equipment went to China, with 297 aircraft, 290 guns, 82 tanks, 400 vehicles and large shipments of small arms and ammunition being delivered between October 1937 and February 1938. Furthermore, Moscow granted the cash strapped KMT three loans totalling 250 million dollars between March 1938 and June 1939, thus allowing the Chinese to buy a total of 904 aircraft, including 318 bombers, 82 tanks, 1,550 vehicles, 1,190 guns, 9,720 machine guns, 50,000 rifles, 167 million rifle rounds and another 17 million machine gun rounds, 1.87 million artillery shells as well as other munitions and supplies between the beginning of the war and mid-1941.

Furthermore, the Soviets dispatched hundreds of specialists and advisers to help the Chinese convert to and operate this equipment as well as train new personnel. Soviet officers were also attached to several Chinese headquarters, although the Chinese took great care to keep them in the role of consultants, not decision-makers. Altogether, there were never more than 500 Soviet specialists

serving in China at the same time, although these proved instrumental in training 90,000 Chinese in various military schools, including 1,000 pilots and 8,000 aviation technicians. Normally, the Soviet advisers remained away from the frontlines, with one major exception, however.

The small Chinese Air Force suffered from grievous losses during the first months of the conflict and the Soviets agreed to dispatch a large contingent of pilots and technicians who were to man several fighter and bomber groups directly engaged in combat against the Japanese. The resulting Operation Zet began in September 1937, when so-called "volunteers" were drawn from VVS RKKA units (Voenno-Vozdushnye Sily

Raboche Krestyanskoy Krasnoy Armii, Air Force of the Workers and Peasants Red Army, or more colloquially, the VVS) across the whole Soviet Union in utmost secrecy before their journey to China, where they began to arrive in October. Once there they formed a bomber and a fighter squadron with 31 aircraft each, in the wake of the first shipments of Polikarpov I-15 and I-16 fighters and Topolev SB-2 bombers, and began to fly their first combat missions in the Nanking area at the end of November 1937. A few months later, four distinct Soviet groups were active in China with the fighter units foremost engaged to protect key cities whilst the bombers were used mainly to strike Japanese airbases. Soviet air operations continued unabated until mid-1939, when the VVS volunteer corps began to be withdrawn, leaving behind only a few advisers. Altogether, around 700 Soviet pilots served in China, where around a third of them died in combat or accidents.²²

The Kwantung Army's Build-up

Once the whole Manchurian territory was secured, the Kwantung Army's main strength continued to rely on three divisions between 1933 and 1936, which were rotated from Japan on a regular basis. The Army's headquarters, which had been resettled in Hsinking, controlled an ever increasing number of other formations such as the 1st Mixed Brigade, border garrison forces or various support units, and correspondingly, Kwantung Army manpower rose from 114,100 men in 1933 to 194,100 men three years later. However, and from 1937 on, the OKVDA's own build-up enticed Tokyo to massively reinforce its contingent in Manchuria, and this despite the war in China. Furthermore, from 1938 on, the divisions attached to the Kwantung Army continued to be regular ones whilst similar units dispatched to China were from the reserve, thus emphasising the Army's status as an elite force whilst demonstrating that the Soviet Union remained the main concern of the AGS. Thus, by May 1939, the Kwantung Army had eight divisions as well as seven border garrison units, dedicated to defend specific fortified areas. These varied in strength, from a single infantry battalion coupled with an artillery detachment to an almost brigade-sized force. All these units were tailor-made to defend specific areas and would have

Table 7: Kwantung Army's Order of Battle as of May 1939

4th Division	HQ Chiamussu
7th Division	HQ Tsitsihar, Kwantung Army strategic reserve
23rd Division	HQ Hailar
1st Independent Garrison Unit	HQ Mukden, 1st to 6th Independent Garrison Infantry Battalions
2nd Independent Garrison Unit	HQ Hsinking, 7th to 12th Independent Garrison Infantry Battalions
3rd Independent Garrison Unit	HQ Angangchi, 13th to 18th Independent Garrison Infantry Battalions
4th Independent Garrison Unit	HQ Mutanchiang, 19th to 24th Independent Garrison Infantry Battalions
5th Independent Garrison Unit	HQ Harbin, 25th to 30th Independent Garrison Infantry Battalions
3rd Heavy Field Artillery Brigade	Two artillery regiments
1st Tank Group	HQ Kungchuling, 3rd and 4th Tank Regiments
3rd Army	2nd, 8th and 12th Divisions, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Border Garrison Units
4th Army	1st Division, 5th, 6th and 7th Border Garrison Units
5th Army	11th Division, 3rd Cavalry Brigade, 4th Border Garrison Unit

controlled the border between Lake Khanka and Khabarovsk, with the 11th Division, the 3rd Cavalry Brigade and the 4th Border Garrison. Furthermore, the Kwantung Army HQ itself directly controlled the 23rd Division, based in Hailar and protecting the borders with Mongolia, the 4th Division and the 7th Division, located in Tsitsihar and thus perfectly positioned to reinforce either the 23rd Division or the 4th Army, as well as the 1st Tank Group based in Hsinking and the 3rd Heavy Field Artillery Brigade with two regiments.²³

A Puppet State Army

been classified as fortress troops in other armies and thus unfit for mobile operations. Last but not least, the 1st Tank Group, with two tank regiments and support units, and which had succeeded the 1st Mixed Brigade after the latter's dissolution, the 3rd Cavalry Brigade and the 3rd Heavy Field Artillery Brigade, with two regiments, were also under its command, as were the 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th and 17th anti-aircraft regiments, each with two 75mm and one 20mm anti-aircraft gun batteries. Furthermore, the Kwantung Army controlled five independent garrison units, each with six infantry battalions. To control the increasing number of units under its control, the Kwantung Army activated the 3rd Army on 13 January 1938, followed by the 4th Army on 15 July 1938 and the 5th Army on 19 May 1939.

The 4th Army (HQ in Peian) was facing the Amur River with its 1st Division and the 5th, 6th and 7th Border Garrisons, whilst the 3rd and 5th Armies were facing the Ussuri River. The 3rd Army (HQ in Mutanchang) was responsible of the area between Korea and Lake Khanka with the 2nd, 8th and 12th Divisions as well as the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Border Garrisons, whilst the 5th Army (HQ in Tungan)

theoretically rely on the Manchukuoan Army, officially created in April 1932 in order to provide the new state with a nominally independent army, to support the occupying forces. Almost as soon as Manchuria's conquest was achieved, a new army was raised simply by mass-enrolling tens of thousands captured soldiers from the former Young Marshal's Army. By the end of 1932, the nascent Manchukuoan Army included 10 cavalry brigades, seven infantry brigades and 12 mixed brigades operating under the guise of four Guard Armies which were acting as territorial commands. However, the new force had inherited the flaws of its previous warlord incarnation, noticeably with overall poor morale, endemic opium addiction among the rank and file, massive desertion rates and recurring mutinies. Unsurprisingly, the Army's performance during anti-bandit operations was abysmal.

Accordingly, in 1934, the Japanese implemented a large-scale reform of the Manchukuoan Army by reducing its size from 111,000 to roughly 80,000 men. From that year on, only officers trained under Japanese aegis in the Manchukuoan schools were commissioned. Japanese advisers corseted the entire institution,



The IJA invested heavily in its Air Corps and by the end of the 1930s, this had become a potent force. This picture shows rows of Ki-21 heavy bombers, Ki-30 light bombers and Ki-27 fighters. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The Headquarters of the Kwantung Army in Hsinking. (Open source)



Manchuria was notorious for its harsh winters. A Japanese soldier is finding a way to augment his ration. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

down to company level. Furthermore, five District Armies, numbered from one to five, replaced the Guard Armies. The units' orders of battle were standardised, thus giving birth to 26 mixed brigades, numbered from 1 to 26. These included either one or two infantry regiments, one cavalry regiment and one mortar or artillery company. Another seven cavalry brigades, with either two or three cavalry regiments and one mortar or artillery company, also came into being. These were however much less powerful than their designations would suggest as the infantry regiments nominally included 899 men divided in two battalions with three infantry, one

MG and one mortar company each, whilst the cavalry regiments had a nominal strength of 458 men divided in three cavalry and one MG squadron. Numbers of more specific units came into being, such as Mongol cavalry regiments or the Asano brigade, whose soldiers were recruited entirely among the White Russian community.

The Japanese also began to provide new equipment roughly at the same time, with 50,000 Type 38 carbines, as well as around 30 Type 92 Cavalry Tanks, and several batches of Type 11 LMGs. This remained however insufficient to reequip the Army along IJA lines. Not only was organic firepower among its units inferior to their Japanese equivalents, but the Manchukuoan Army continued to rely on the vast stocks of weapons of all sorts inherited from the Old and Young Marshal's times. The main purpose of the army all through the 1930s remained foremost internal security, guarding the border and counterinsurgency. Correspondingly, it could not do much more than act as an auxiliary force for the IJA in the event of a full-fledged conflict against the Soviet Union.²⁴

Counterinsurgency came as a priority in Manchukuo. The 1931 and 1932 invasion had thrown into the wild tens of thousands of armed Chinese soldiers who had to turn to banditry as a means of survival, thus giving birth to a large number of groups scattered all along the country. Whilst both Manchukuoan and Japanese authorities continued to classify these as "bandits", a number of them were motivated by anti-Japanese resentment, which was also rampant among the Chinese population at large. Between 1932 and 1933, the IJA conducted a series of large-scale operations and easily scattered the largest groups but the estimated 70,000 insurgents who remained in the field had gained in efficiency and proved much more difficult to annihilate. Furthermore, by 1934, the CCP began to systematically infiltrate the insurgent groups whilst creating and expanding its own *maquis*, giving birth to a united Anti-Japanese Allied Army under Communist control.

In 1934 the Japanese switched to a deliberate and protracted counterinsurgency campaign, countering the insurgents by creating local anti-communist organisations to corset the population, gather intelligence and track down insurgents. They also attempted to cut them off from their source of supplies by regrouping the farmers into tightly controlled collective hamlets. By 1937, 10,000 such hamlets – with 5,500,000 inhabitants – had been created. Furthermore, immense efforts were concentrated into establishing administrative control of the remaining villages and towns with a systematic registration of the residents. By 1936, these measures and the uninterrupted sweeps of both Manchukuoan Army and IJA units had begun to pay

off as, according to Japanese intelligence estimates, only 22,000 insurgents remained in the field.²⁵

Special Intelligence

A crucial aspect of the stand-off between Japanese and Soviet forces in the Far East was an obvious asymmetry in terms of intelligence-gathering capabilities. Richard Sorge, a German journalist and Soviet military intelligence operative who arrived in Japan in 1933, proved extremely talented in building up a spy network with tentacles that reached even the heart of the Japanese Cabinet, thus providing Moscow with extremely valuable strategic level intelligence.²⁶ In the meantime, both the NKVD and military intelligence found it easy to infiltrate agents into Manchuria, if only because the White Russian community provided an excellent shelter for Soviet agents. Indeed, the Japanese themselves assessed Soviet intelligence-gathering capabilities as much superior to their own.

The IJA was well aware of the crucial necessity to get an idea of the RKKA's evolving capabilities in the Far East. Correspondingly, the AGS 2nd Bureau, in charge of intelligence, constantly increased the means allocated to its Russian subsection, which became a full Section in 1935. Furthermore, the Kwantung Army did the same, and its special intelligence branch included by the mid-1930s at least a thousand trained intelligence officers. However, building spy networks in the Soviet Union proper was extremely difficult because the entire society was corseted by the totalitarian state security apparatus. It was impossible for Japanese agents to move freely as explained by Colonel Hayashi Saburo, head of the Soviet section of the AGS:

Japanese attachés in Moscow were obliged to stay in a certain hotel, and their telephone and letters were always tapped by a notorious Russian secret police, NKVD. When they went out,



A Manchukuoan Army cavalry patrol. These were to prove invaluable in helping the IJA to control the state borders and fight an endemic insurgency. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A Manchukuoan Army truck carrying a field gun. This image is however deceptive; the Army was even less-well equipped with motorised vehicles than the IJA, whilst available heavy weapons were limited in numbers. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

they were tailed by the NKVD and sometimes tailed in public lavatories.²⁷

Accordingly, Japanese human intelligence activities were largely reduced to observing Soviet forces across the border and instructing the few diplomatic couriers allowed to travel along the Trans-



Japanese “anti-bandit” operations all over China were notoriously ruthless, and any hint of suspicion was enough to end in an execution on the spot, if not worse. The fate of these Chinese women can only be guessed at. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Siberian Railway to report the troop movements that they observed during their journeys. Furthermore, a team of Russian refugees was also recruited to monitor the available Soviet publications – mostly newspapers – and radio broadcasts, in an attempt to get information about unit locations and Soviet staff officers’ biographies.

The Japanese proved however much luckier once they began to cooperate and exchange information with Eastern European countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Rumania and, foremost, Poland. Several Japanese specialists were sent to the latter country in the 1920s and were trained by Polish cryptologists, reputed to be the best in the world, in the arcane art of codebreaking. This and continuous cooperation with the Poles thereafter allowed the Kwantung Army to activate in 1934 a Special Intelligence Section controlling eight intercept stations, and hundreds of codebreakers who managed to break the Soviet border guard, RKKA and VVS codes on several occasions, with the resulting information being known as “Special intelligence”. At last, in mid-1938, the Japanese obtained a major intelligence breakthrough with the defection of Commissar of State Security 3rd Rank Genrikh Liushkov, head of the Far Eastern Regional NKVD directorate, who provided his Japanese counterparts with a massive amount of intelligence about not only the NKVD itself but also Soviet military dispositions in the area and the effects of the Great Terror on these.

Regardless of both the quality and the quantity of the intelligence provided by its dedicated units, the IJA officer corps and even intelligence specialists tended to be affected by its *Seishin* cult, if not outright racism, whilst assessing RKKA’s potency. This became even worse as repeated tactical victories in China had already infused in the officer corps what would be latter described as the “victory disease”, that is a propensity to overestimate one’s own capabilities and underestimate those of the enemy as shown by this assessment by one Japanese analyst in 1938:²⁸

Despite the national despotism, the Russian armed forces are uncontrolled, in a state of confusion, and corrupt in morale. This holds as true for the Red Army as for the tsarist Army; they have almost the same characteristics and they always will, as long as the essence of the Russian people does not change.²⁹

Often enough however, cooler heads prevailed, with these arriving at more realistic conclusions, whilst AGS Staff officers were planning operations on less enthusiastic preconceptions, concluding that Japanese units were only slightly superior to their Soviet counterparts, although this kind of assessment was not diffused in the army at large. Nonetheless, in 1938, Lieutenant General Kawamura Kyosuke, head of the Kwantung Army was observing in public, and thus quiet mildly warning his peers, that there were:

great differences between the Soviet army and the regular Chinese forces, with respect to training, organisation, and materiel. Soviet deserters tell us that even though they detest Stalin, they love their country. It stands to reason that the USSR is stronger than China, even if only for the reason of ardent patriotism.³⁰

Elusive Hachi-Go

Once in control of Manchuria, the IJA had to completely re-adapt its plans for a war against the Soviet Union. In turn, these plans were, as always, dictated by the local military geography. Indeed, the borders between the Soviet Union, Mongolia and Manchuria could be divided in three fronts defined by geography.

- The Eastern, or Ussuri front. This included the 800 kilometre border from Korea all the way to the junction between the Ussuri and the Amur rivers, with the border more or less corresponding to the Ussuri River itself. In turn, this front

was split in two by Lake Khanka. It was also vital because it corresponded to the Soviet Maritime Province, and thus Vladivostok.

- The Northern, or Amur front. The Amur itself formed much of the border and was a formidable obstacle in its own right. In addition, the Lesser Hsinghan mountain range ran from west to east well behind the border, offering a formidable defensive position, as was a part of the Greater Hsinghan mountain range, which ran from north to south, with both forming natural ramparts barring access to the central part of Manchuria.
- The Western front, which encompassed the borders with Mongolia and the Trans-Baikal. Again from a Japanese perspective, an advance in the area all the way to the Lake Baikal could sever all the connections between European and Far-Eastern Russia in a single blow. On the other hand, such an offensive was hardly practical because the region was mostly covered in desert and lacked both railways and roads. Furthermore, a Soviet offensive through this area would eventually have to cross the Greater Hsinghan mountain range to reach the Manchukuoan heartland.

Aside of the ability to anchor potential defensive positions on easily defensible terrain both on the Northern and Western fronts, the IJA benefited immensely from occupying a central position supported by well-developed railway infrastructure which allowed them to move their forces or support operations relatively easily. One must indeed keep in mind that due to lack of motorisation, the IJA depended upon railways in exactly the same fashion as late 19th centuries armies. Furthermore, the climate played a crucial role, with heavy rains concentrated between June and August and extremely cold weathers and heavy snowing during the winter.

Unsurprisingly, between 1932 and 1937, the IJA planned to maintain a defensive stance on the Western and Northern fronts,

where their forces were to launch only limited and in essence diversionary operations, and attack on the Eastern front. Around six divisions were to launch a two-pronged assault north and south of Lake Khanka whilst another division would make an amphibious landing west of Vladivostok and be reinforced by another advancing from Korea. Whilst besieging Vladivostok, and with the influx of new divisions from Japan, the IJA would expand its operations in the east whilst defending against expected Soviet counter-offensives in the west. Once these counter-offensives had been defeated and the Maritime Province secured with the capture or cutting off of Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Blagoveschensk, the Japanese would advance in turn toward Trans-Baikal. Crucially, the Japanese expected that the bottleneck of the Trans-Baikal Railway would not allow the Soviets to sustain more than 40 divisions in the whole Far Eastern Theatre at the same time, thus placing the two opponents on roughly equal terms once the IJA had been fully mobilised. Indeed, the Japanese never entertained any illusion about a total defeat of the Soviet Union or an advance west of Lake Baikal, but in essence expected a repeat of the Russo-Japanese War, when their opponents simply gave up after a series of crushing defeats.

The invasion of China made these war plans illusory, although the existing overall planning remained the same but its ambition reduced. However, in 1938, the IJA began to work on a completely different concept, the Hachi-Go plan (Plan Number 8) which was to dictate operations against the Soviets once the China Incident had been resolved, in 1943 at the earliest. Under Hachi-Go, the IJA was to keep on the defensive on the Northern and Eastern fronts and launch a massive offensive with 25 divisions on the Western front with a main advance straight to Chita and a secondary prong through Mongolia. To make the operation feasible however, the IJA intended to build new railways in western Manchukuo and to motorise five of its divisions to provide its forces with the necessary mobility. All of this being a massive undertaking in its own right, as was the large-scale building of fortifications to cover the Eastern front.³¹

4

THE CHANGKUFENG INCIDENT

The defection of Commissar Lyushkov on 13 June 1938 was to have far-reaching, and bloody consequences. Namely, once the defection was known, NKVD border guard units were ordered to tighten their control over the border. Thus, on 6 July 1938, a Kwantung Army signals intelligence unit intercepted and decrypted a message instructing the Soviet 57th Border Guard Unit, in charge of controlling the borders of the Soviet Maritime Province with Korea and Manchuria to permanently occupy the hill of Changkufeng. The latter was one among several hills located in an enclave formed by a loop of the Tumen River and the shore of Lake Kashan, close to the juncture of the Korean, Manchukuoan and Soviet borders. The whole sector was almost treeless, sandy and hilly, although slopes were not steep and allowed for tank movements. The Soviet side of the hills consisted of Lake Kashan and plains crossed by a number of streams and included numerous swamps. The loop between the river and the lake, whilst part of Manchukuoan territory was under IJA Korea Army jurisdiction. Crucially, the command of these hills potentially allowed the interdiction of traffic along the railway line following the border on the Japanese-controlled side. As so often,

the delimitation of the border which crossed the area was unclear and, in any case, contested. On 9 July, Japanese patrols sighted a platoon-sized Soviet force on Changkufeng Hill, busying itself with digging trenches, setting up observation posts and firing positions and laying down barbed wire, thus giving an indication that they were there to stay.

Initially, the Japanese reacted in only a limited fashion and simply ordered the 76th Infantry Regiment's Border Guard Unit to monitor Soviet movements. However, on 15 July, another Japanese border guard patrol closing on Changkufeng was fired upon by their Soviet counterparts, losing one corporal killed in the process. Meanwhile, the Kwantung Army had attempted to strong-arm the Korea Army, threatening to take the matter into its own hands if appropriate – forceful – action, was not taken. However, the Korea Army proved much less inclined than its counterpart to act on its own and simply referred to the AGS in Tokyo for instructions. At the time, IJA top commanders were not the least inclined to risk an all-out war with the Soviets and to the contrary were busy planning the Wuhan offensive in China. However, and at least from the perspective

of Colonel Inada Masazumi of the AGS Operation Bureau, uncertainties about Soviet intents hung like the Sword of Damocles over the Japanese. A limited offensive action to retake Changkufeng by force, defined as a “strategic reconnaissance in force” could very well allow the Japanese to ascertain Moscow’s willingness or not to risk conflict with Japan in order to support the Chinese, and thus to know the extent of the threat looming over the Japanese whilst they were committed there. According to Colonel Inada:

At the tactical textbook level *iryoku teisatsu* might mean the dispatch of small forces into enemy territory to seek local combat intelligence. At the IGHQ level it meant something far more sweeping: to test or fish for the seriousness of Soviet intentions toward the China Incident. Changkufeng, to me, was just a welcome coincidence, something that had been started by the Russians but that we could exploit. We had no thought whatsoever of seizing real estate or provoking a war [...] The little hill of Changkufeng thus possessed a far deeper meaning from the broad standpoint of both sides. If the Russians did cause major trouble – something I refused to believe – they could have the damn hillock. But just how would they react? That was the answer I sought. Victory in China depended on it.¹

Accordingly, on 17 July, the new head of the Korea Army, General Nakamura Kotaro who had just taken over from his predecessor, received the order to make preparations for the retaking of Changkufeng. However, the action was to remain limited with the Japanese forces being forbidden to penetrate into Soviet territory whilst use of airpower was also prohibited. In accordance with the aim of merely assessing Soviet intents, the forces involved were to withdraw in the event of an RKKA counterattack. The Korea Army itself was not considered as a Combat Command and had nominally just two divisions under its control. Out of these, the 20th was in China, leaving only the 19th in Korea. This division was led by Lieutenant Gen Suetaka Kamezo and was garrisoned in northern Korea. The unit was a square division but was at peacetime strength with 10,000 men in total at most. Its infantry battalions in particular had only three infantry companies instead of four, and each of these had only two platoons instead of three. On the other hand, the division commander, Lieutenant General Suetaka Kamezo, had submitted his unit to an especially harsh training regimen, even by IJA standards, and whipped it into a well-honed force.

Thus, on 17 July 1938, the 19th Division dispatched a strong task force toward the incident area, consisting of the 75th Infantry Regiment, one battalion from the 76th Infantry Regiment, two cavalry platoons from the 27th Cavalry Regiment, two battalions from the 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment, the entire 15th Heavy Field Artillery Regiment and the 19th Engineer Regiment, altogether 3,236 men. The task force arrived at its destination on 19 July, where it assembled with the 76th Infantry Regiment’s two-company strong border garrison unit already on site but remained on standby on the western side of the Tumen River. On 24 July, a Japanese detachment occupied Shangchiaoshan Hill a mere 800 metres from Changkufeng. A few days earlier an envoy had been sent toward the Soviet positions to warn them to withdraw before the Japanese took “necessary action”, but the latter was held captive and released only on 26 July.

Contrary to the AGS expectations, Emperor Hirohito outright refused the reconnaissance in force plan when it was presented to him on 20 July, and prohibited any action against Changkufeng, thus forcing the IJA to cancel the operation. Accordingly, the task

force was ordered to withdraw toward its garrisons on 26 July and began to do so two days later. By 29 July, only the 1st Battalion, 76th Infantry Regiment and the 3rd Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment, two engineer platoons and the 7th Battery of the 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment, as well the border guard unit were left in the area. These remaining units were placed under Lieutenant Colonel Senda Sadasue, the head of the latter unit.² In the meantime, the Soviets had reinforced the area with at least a company of border guards whilst the 40th Rifle Division dispatched two rifle battalions and a cavalry squadron on 24 July to support the border guards, although Marshal Blyukher, the OKVDA commander, ordered his forces to show restraint and avoid escalation.³

An Aggressive Commander

The incident was to suddenly escalate out of control despite both the Japanese Emperor and the OKVDA commander’s willingness to defuse it. Indeed, the area remained prone to troubles with the hill chain between Lake Khasan and the Tumen River occupied in succession by Japanese and Soviet detachments. On the morning of 29 July, an 11-man strong NKVD squad under Lieutenant Makhalin was spotted by the Japanese whilst it was settling on the western side of Shachaofeng Hill, around two kilometres north of Changkufeng and well into what the Japanese considered as uncontested Manchukuoan territory. As soon as he was informed, the 19th Division commander, considering that the clear trespassing into Manchukuo soil and the different location made Hirohito’s order irrelevant, ordered the border guard units to expel the intruders. By mid-afternoon, and after a vicious firefight followed by a bayonet charge, a Japanese platoon, covered by another, had annihilated Lieutenant Makhalin’s squad, killing eight Soviets border guards. During the following hours the small Japanese force also used LMG and grenades-discharger fire to repel a Soviet company-sized detachment which came to investigate, before then pulling back. Lake Khasan was fast turning into a powder keg.⁴

Indeed, on the following morning, the two Japanese infantry battalions and the mountain artillery battery already there were gradually reinforced with the arrival of the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 75th Infantry Regiment, the regimental gun company, as well as two heavy guns of the 15th Heavy Field Artillery Regiment, and all these forces were placed under the 75th Infantry Regiment commander, Colonel Sato Kotoku. That same day, Colonel Sato was ordered by his divisional commander to expel the Soviets from Changkufeng and take control over Shachaofeng during the next night. Strikingly, Lieutenant General Suetaka gave the order without referring to higher levels of command and downplayed the seriousness of the events. During the next hours, Colonel Sato and his staff drafted their attack plans and made the necessary preparations for the coming night attack. The 1st Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment was to assault Changkufeng from the south whilst the 10th Company from the 3rd Battalion, 75th Regiment was to attack from the north and cut the defenders’ line of retreat. Another company, the 6th, from the 2nd Battalion, 75th Regiment was kept in reserve, ready to launch a third attack to support the other two. The whole night assault was to take place without artillery support to maintain the effect of surprise as long as possible. At dawn and once Changkufeng captured, the 1st Battalion, 76th Infantry Regiment was to clear and seize Shachaofeng, this time with artillery support. The bulk of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 75th Regiment were held in reserve on the western side of the Tumen River. Altogether, 1,114 men were to take part in the attack against Changkufeng and another 379 against Shachaofeng.

As intended, the 1st Battalion, 75th Regiment's attack began a few minutes after midnight on 31 July, with Japanese advance parties managing to cut breaches in the barbed wire protecting the Soviet position. At 0215 AM, the battalion rushed toward the enemy positions with the Soviets firing blindly toward them, thanks to the standard IJA tactic of not opening fire during the advance in order to not reveal their exact position. However, the engagement turned into a bloody and confused dogfight with each side hurling grenades at close range. The defenders exacted a heavy toll on the Japanese assault parties and were reinforced with at least one RKKA platoon, to the point that the attack stalled once the first Soviet line had been taken. At 0315 AM, Colonel Sato ordered the 6th Company to join the fray to regain the lost momentum and the Japanese managed to overwhelm the final enemy positions during a last-ditch assault covered by machine gun fire. At 0515 AM, the battalion fired a green flare, thus confirming that it had successfully conquered Changkufeng. Meanwhile, the 10th Company had succeeded in seizing Hill 24 without meeting strong opposition. At dawn, a limited Soviet counterattack targeted Hill 52, which had been used as a basis of departure for the 1st Battalion's attack, and was held by a platoon supported by AT guns, but this was swiftly repulsed, and at least one Soviet tank was destroyed in the process. Indeed, this did not prevent the 1st Battalion, 76th Infantry Regiment from launching its attack against Shachaofeng. Despite Japanese fears, the

hill proved less-well defended than Changkufeng and its defenders were swiftly overwhelmed. Japanese units then concentrated on securing the line linking Hill 52, Changkufeng and Shachaofeng, supported by artillery that fired a total of 74 150mm and 199 75mm shells on 31 July.

The battle proved much bloodier than expected; 34 Japanese were killed and 99 wounded during the assault against Changkufeng and another 11 were killed and 34 wounded at Shachaofeng; the 1st Battalion, 75th Regiment lost around a third of its manpower that night. Strikingly, the Soviets acknowledged having lost 13 men killed in action whilst the Japanese reported having retrieved around 30 dead bodies, 157 rifles, two AT guns, four HMGs and six LMGs at Changkufeng alone, assessing that they had killed 300 enemy soldiers.⁵ The two captured M1932 45mm anti-tank guns would prove invaluable during the forthcoming days with their much better performance compared to the Japanese Type 94 37mm guns. The Soviets acknowledged the fierce nature of the combat too. According to the 59th Border Guard Unit's CO, Colonel K. Y. Grebennik:

On the night of 30/31 July the Japanese launched a vigorous attack on the Zaozemaya and Bezymyanrnya Hills [Changkufeng and Shachaofeng respectively] with artillery support. The hills were defended only by the border guard units which had been

somewhat reinforced by the reserves I had at my disposal. There were 92 border guards on the two hills, including 60 men on Zaozemaya Hill. The border guards were reinforced by one infantry company of field troops and a tank platoon. [...] The former arrived from the direction of Zarechye [...] at about 0030 on 31 July. The platoon of three tanks also arrived between 0001 and 0030. At 0625 on 31 July the Japanese occupied the hills. Almost all of our border guard garrison fell on the battlefields. The garrison commander and concurrently commanding officer of the outpost, was wounded. Later on, our field troops arrived on the spot, and subsequent operations were conducted under the direction of the Regular Army authorities.⁶

Soviet Reaction

Soon enough, it turned out that the Soviets were not the least eager to back down as they had during the previous year's Amur Incident. To the contrary, the whole 40th Rifle Division was ordered to rush to the scene and rally the 119th

Table 8: IJA 19th Division's Order of Battle, Changkufeng Incident

Unit	CO	NOTES
Division HQ	CO; Lieutenant General Suetaka Kamezo. Chief of Staff; Colonel Nakamura Yoshiaki	
37th Brigade HQ	Major General Morimoto Nobuki	
73rd Infantry Regiment	Colonel Sato Tamenori	1,068 men engaged in the battle
74th Infantry Regiment	Colonel Cho Isamu	1,461 men engaged in the battle
38th Brigade HQ	Major General Ono Nobuaki	
75th Infantry Regiment	Colonel Sato Kotoku	1,379 men engaged in the battle
76th Infantry Regiment	Colonel Okido Sanji	1,094 men engaged in the battle
Border Garrison Unit	Lieutenant Col Senda Sadasue	Two infantry companies, drawn from the 76th Infantry Regiment, 292 men
25th Mountain Artillery Regiment	Colonel Tanaka Ryukichi	24 75mm pack guns
27th Cavalry Regiment	Lieutenant Colonel Kubota Takajiro	
19th Engineer Regiment	Colonel Kobayashi Mokichi	
19th Transport Regiment		
Reinforcements		
15th Heavy Field Artillery Regiment	Lieutenant Colonel Suzuki Tadashi	two batteries with eight 150mm howitzers
Field Artillery Battalion		Eight Type 90 field guns dispatched from the 1st Independent Mixed Brigade, Kwantung Army
Independent Field Artillery Battery		Two Type 89 150mm cannons
2nd Armoured Train Unit	Lieutenant Colonel Morita Sutezo	One Type 94 Armoured Train
5th AA Regiment	Lieutenant Colonel Hiramuki Kujuku	Two AA batteries



An IJA infantry squad ready to dash forward. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Rifle Regiment's subunits already there, and by the evening of the 1 August, around 3,000 men supported by tanks and artillery were reported by Japanese lookouts on the hills. That day, the 118th Rifle Regiment launched several limited counterattacks despite being short on ammunition and with some of its men equipped with nothing better than wooden training grenades, but these were easily repulsed by the Japanese, with one of the Soviet companies losing 24 men in a single engagement. The first Soviet artillery batteries began to fire as well, but without inflicting any significant damage. Importantly, the VVS units in the region had been mobilised – with about 250 aircraft in total – and ordered to strike the Japanese forces on the Chengkufeng area.

Accordingly, on 1 August at 11:00 AM a first wave of 26 light bombers struck the Japanese positions, followed an hour and a half after by a second wave of 35 heavy bombers. Two other waves, one at 14:30 with 55 light bombers and the other at 16:40 with 35 light bombers followed. Flying at roughly 2,000 metres, the bombers

approaching aircraft by waving blankets. On the other hand, the Soviet air attacks proved surprisingly ineffective and only four soldiers were wounded and a single horse killed during the air raids. IJA anti-aircraft fire, largely limited to small arms fire, proved as ineffective. Despite firing 15,000 MG and 7,000 rifle rounds against the Soviet aircraft, only two were shot down and fell on Manchukuoan soil.⁷ According to one of the Japanese soldiers: "Our troops became convinced that the bombings and air-to-ground fire were ineffective. But since our anti-aircraft unit fired wildly, the pilots felt free to descend to a mere 500 or 600 metres."⁸

The 40th Rifle Division's Ordeal

The 40th Rifle Division completed its concentration during the night of 1-2 August, despite the lack of communication infrastructure connecting the would-be battlefield with the Soviet garrisons; indeed this was limited to a single gravel road. Colonel Vladimir Bazarov, the unit commander, opted to target simultaneously the

two extremities of the Japanese line. In the north, the 119th and 120th Rifle Regiments supported by the 40th Independent Tank Battalion were to attack Shachaofeng whilst in the south, the 118th Rifle Regiment supported by the 32nd Independent Tank Battalion was to take-on Hill 52. These attacks were to be supported by 94 guns of the divisional artillery as well as by an intensive VVS effort. However, the division was ill-prepared for this sudden jump from peacetime routine to fully fledged war. As with everything else in the RKKA, the unit had been hit hard by the purges and lacked 40 percent of its medical personnel as a result.

The Japanese line was still held by the 1st and 3rd



A view from one of the hills toward the Tumen River. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)



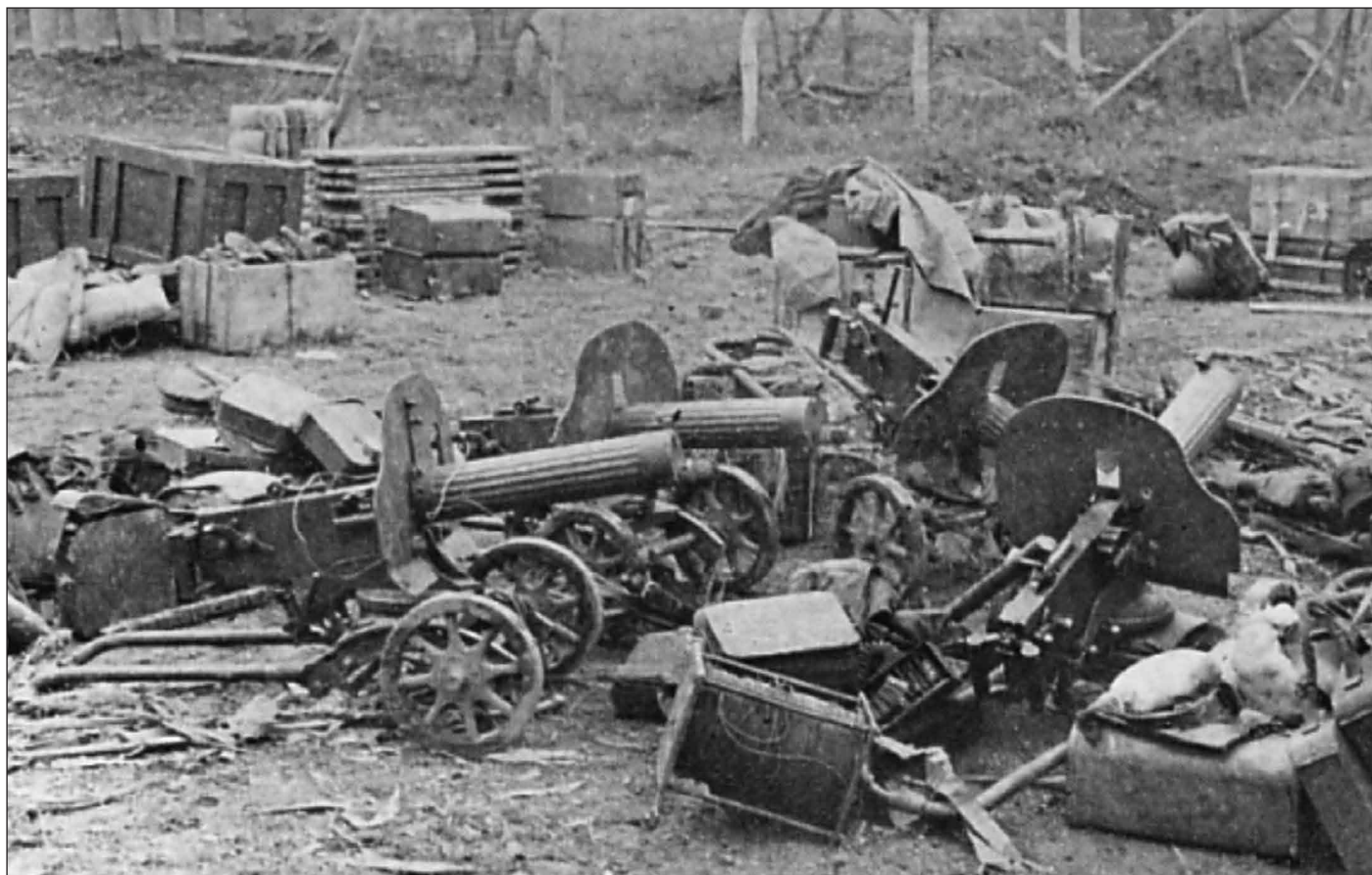
19th Division soldiers in the vicinity of Hill 52. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)

Battalions, 75th Infantry Regiment, and another three infantry companies, the 6th from the 2nd Battalion of the same regiment, the 10th Company of the 76th Infantry Regiment's 1st Battalion and the border garrison unit's 2nd Company. Artillery was limited to

the AT and Gun Companies of the 75th Infantry Regiment and a battery of the 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment. As always, Japanese artillerymen were short on ammunition and accordingly, were instructed by Colonel Tanaka, the 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment CO to: "exalt maximum annihilation power at close range, engage targets which are confirmed, and display fire power which is sniperlike, concentrated and as swift as a hurricane."⁹ Obviously, Japanese infantrymen could not expect their artillery to prevent the Soviet troops from closing in on their positions. All of these forces remained under the command of Colonel Sato, the 75th Regiment's CO.

Whilst benefiting from a three to one superiority in manpower and an even more massive superiority in

firepower, the Soviet attack was to be impeded by several crucial factors. The first was geography as Lake Khasan, through fordable, acted as a bulwark in front of the centre of the Japanese line, thus leaving only the north and the south as the obvious main avenues



M1910 Machine Guns captured on Changkufeng Hill during the 30 to 31 July night battle. (Open source)



Captured Soviet M1932 45mm AT guns shown to the public. The two guns captured by the Japanese early during the incident were to prove invaluable; these were far superior to the standard IJA Type 94 37mm AT Gun. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Riflemen of the Soviet 40th Rifle Division advancing toward Japanese positions. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)

of attack. Furthermore, whilst the hills themselves were not insurmountable obstacles in their own right – their slopes could be climbed from the Soviet side by tanks – these were preceded by marshy terrain in their immediate vicinity. This terrain created mud-traps for armoured vehicles, whilst the hills still offered an excellent field of view for Japanese troops entrenched on their top. To add insult to injury, a dense fog was to linger over the area that day, especially during the afternoon, and this greatly hindered the VVS activities. Indeed, whilst three waves of bombers and fighters strafed and bombed the Japanese positions between 05:15 and 11:00, the air raids ceased during the entire afternoon, and a last wave only came at 18:00. As during the previous days, these failed to make an impression on the defenders, especially as the bombers dropped their loads from 2,000 metres altitude, thus losing precision. That day, the VVS flew at least 103 sorties against enemy positions. The RKKA artillery was impeded too because the gunners were lacking accurate maps of the area and had also been instructed to avoid shelling the other side of the border, thus complicating immensely their tasks. The arrival of the bulk of the guns was delayed in any case

and only a few batteries were ready to fire at the beginning of the day. Last but not least, the 40th Rifle Division's staff had rushed its preparations in order to attack as fast as possible and this left no place for a thorough reconnaissance of enemy positions, whilst being forbidden to cross onto Manchurian soil, thus finding itself forced to launch only frontal assaults right in the teeth of Japanese defences.

The 118th Rifle Regiment and the 32nd Independent Tank Battalion advanced toward Hill 52 early in the morning and by 10:00 had closed to 800 metres from the Japanese entrenchments. However, their progress was stopped by a 30-minute artillery barrage followed by a flank counterattack of the 3rd Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment, until the 118th Rifle Regiment was forced to withdraw early in the afternoon.

Whilst the two Soviet forces were supposed to strike simultaneously, the 119th and 120th Rifle Regiment arrived at their departure positions much too late, with one of the regiments having to wade through Lake Khasan, and it was not until around 13:00 that these attacked Shachaofeng and managed to close within 200 metres of the enemy positions, only to be repulsed

by Japanese fire and to fall back a few hundred metres away, with both sides contenting themselves to fire at each other until the end of the day. The 118th Rifle Regiment did however make a last attempt against Hill 52 during the evening, but to no avail; by 22:00, the Soviet riflemen had been repulsed again, thanks in great part to very intensive grenade discharger fire. Thus, the 40th Rifle Division's attack ended in a major failure with heavy losses in tanks as, unsurprisingly, a number of these had found themselves stuck in the marshes and became easily pickings for the Japanese anti-tank gunners. Indeed, Japanese positions had hardly been dented at all, with the defending units suffering from a mere 25 casualties, including 10 killed and 15 wounded that day, whilst estimating to have destroyed at least two dozen tanks and killed around 300 enemy soldiers. IJA officers also observed that the Soviets advanced in piecemeal fashion and in widely separated successive waves, thus allowing the defenders to deal with them separately, whilst coordination between tank, infantry and artillery was abysmal. A report of the Soviet border guards about the 40th Rifle Division attack written thereafter concurred indeed that:



This view of Soviet officers on top of Changkufeng Hill in the aftermath of the incident, shows the view over Lake Khasan – and thus in how strong a position the defenders were in during the battle. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Part of the artillery that had arrived during the night was not ready; the enemy's disposition, and particularly forwards positions, had not been studied; communications had not been set up fully; and the left flank of the force was not in a position to start the attack at the appointed hour.¹⁰

On 3 August at dawn, the 118th Rifle Regiment launched a company-sized attack against Hill 52 supported by a few tanks, but this was easily repulsed. At this point, the Soviets pulled out of their forward positions and began to dig their own trenches 800 to 1,000 metres away from the Japanese positions. The bad weather over the area also prevented the VVS from intervening, but not so the Soviet artillery. To the contrary, the latter began to continuously shell Japanese positions in the afternoon, whilst the artillerymen's precision grew continuously from that day on, beginning to wear down the defenders. Indeed, a lucky shot fell right in the midst of a 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment's supply column, instantly killing two men and 20 horses. Nonetheless, casualties suffered on 2 and 3 August by the Japanese amounted to 16 killed and 25 wounded, whilst the defenders reported that the Soviets had suffered from 600 casualties in total.

That day too, Komkor Grigory Shtern, Chief of Staff of the OKVDA replaced Kombrig V.N. Sergeev as Commander of the 39th Rifle Corps. Formerly a representative of the Comintern in Spain, where he had acted as a chief military adviser, Shtern swiftly concluded that the ongoing attacks were pointless and ordered a cessation of these until his forces were reorganised.

Meanwhile, the Japanese were reshuffling their command structure and reinforcing themselves. On 3 August, the 37th Brigade's headquarters, under Major General Morimoto Nobuki, took over responsibility for the Japanese forces whilst the bulk of the 73rd Infantry Regiment crossed the Tumen, bringing the Japanese forces defending the hill line to five and a half infantry battalions. These were reorganised into three main components:

- A left wing under the 73rd Infantry Regiment headquarters with the latter's 2nd Battalion and Gun Company, the 1st Battalion of the 76th Infantry Regiment, the 2nd Border Guard Unit company, a mountain artillery battery and an engineer platoon.
- A right wing under the 75th Infantry Regiment headquarters with the latter's 1st and 3rd Battalions and Gun Company, the 2nd Battalion's 6th Company, a mountain artillery battery and an engineer platoon.
- A reserve with the 1st Battalion of the 73rd Infantry Regiment.

The 19th Division's commander had much more ambitious plans than simply reinforcing his forces and intended to launch a major flank attack targeting Soviet formations facing the Japanese positions. This was vetoed by the AGS, however, which did not want to hear about any escalation and for the same reason, continued to forbid any deployment of air power.¹¹ From Tokyo's perspective, the incident was to be resolved through negotiation and the 19th Division's purpose remained to hold fast on the hill complex, nothing more and nothing less, as made crystal clear by a telegram from the AGS to the Korea Army sent just before midnight on 3 August:

Our policy is to endeavour to bring this incident to speedy termination through negotiations, which is exactly what you were already notified by the War Ministry. To broaden [the] combat front positively, as proposed, would run counter to [the] principle of [the] Imperial order and might provide [the] Soviet side an excuse for attacking toward Shuiliufeng.¹²

The Quest for Artillery

After having concluded that the 40th Rifle Division alone was insufficient for the task, Komkor Shtern opted to wait for the arrival of the bulk of the 39th Rifle Corps in the vicinity of the Tumen River enclave. Thus, Soviet activities remained largely limited to artillery bombardment of Japanese positions whilst the VVS flew several reconnaissance sorties over the area. The shelling began at 07:00 on 4 August, with the Soviet batteries firing continuously against the hills but also the Japanese rear with an emphasis on the single bridge crossing the Tumen River – to the point of significantly disturbing the carrying over of supplies from one shore of the river to the other. However, the RKKA artillerymen were still lacking adequate fire coordinates at this stage and a number of batteries were not correctly zeroed in. Nonetheless, the Soviets were well underway to win the artillery battle as the Japanese guns lacked the range to initiate any counterbattery fire; the only thing the 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment gunners could do to alleviate the burden of their fellow infantrymen was to open fire from time to time against enemy positions within their reach in order to draw Soviet counterbattery fire. The bombardment of Japanese positions continued unabated the following day, and clearly, the Soviet gunners were increasingly finding their mark, especially so as tanks were also engaging Japanese positions with direct fire, as reported by the 75th Infantry Regiment diary: "From today enemy shellfire was "coned" and grew

Table 9: 39th Rifle Corps at Lake Khasan, early August 1938		
Unit	Commanding Officer	Notes
39th Rifle Corps	Kombrig V.N. Sergeev	22,950 men, 245 T-26, 79 BT and 21 T-37 tanks, 58 M1932 AT guns and 179 field guns and howitzers
32nd Rifle Division	Colonel N.E Berazin	32nd Independent Tank Battalion, 94th, 95th and 96th Rifle Regiments
40th Rifle Division	Colonel Vladimir Bazarov	118th, 119th and 120th Rifle Regiments, 121st Cavalry Regiment, 40th Light Artillery Regiment, 40th Independent Tank Battalion
2nd Motorised Brigade	Colonel Aleksei Panfilov	One reconnaissance, one motorised infantry and three tank battalions

arrangements kindly be made for expeditious dispatch and cooperation of following units from Kwantung Army; railway guns – one battery, M-89, 15-cm. Cannon – one or two batteries; M-90 field artillery-three batteries.¹⁴

The AGS reacted swiftly and by 5 August had instructed the Kwantung Army to dispatch two batteries with eight Type



Komkor Grigory Shtern inspecting 39th Rifle Corps' forward positions. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

increasingly accurate, until every area along our front was deprived of its dead angles and our casualties mounted.¹³

Whilst the continuous enemy shelling killed only five men and wounded another three on 4 August, the Japanese officers were clearly becoming worried; the same day, and acting on the available artillery's inability to at least impede the Soviet batteries, the 19th Division's CO did send the following request to both the Korea Army and the AGS:

We are constantly being fired on by no less than 90 pieces operating from positions in Changkufeng area beyond firing range of own mountain guns. This is encouraging enemy morale; there is concern less it affects our own. I believe it imperative to subdue foe once to settle incident quickly, and I therefore request



One of the nearly 200 guns of the 39th Rifle Corps preparing to fire against Japanese positions. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

90 field guns from the 1st Independent Mixed Brigade as well as a pair of 150mm Type 89 cannon and the 2nd Armoured Train Unit carrying two 100mm guns as well as two Type 88 AA guns, but these arrived only on 8 August 1938. Meanwhile, the Korea Army had also instructed the 15th Heavy Field Artillery Regiment to transfer to the front two batteries with eight 150mm howitzers, as well as the entire 5th Anti-Aircraft Regiment, thus bringing the number of AA guns available to 16. From 9 August on, the newly arrived heavy guns concentrated on counterbattery fire and the frontline troops reported a marked decrease of the Soviet artillery accuracy as a result. Indeed, the latter on one occasion executed three of their own gunners after having been charged with panicking under enemy artillery fire, whilst at the end of the battle, 32 artillery pieces had been destroyed or broken.

However, all of this proved far from enough to counter the overwhelming Soviet superiority in artillery, as the number of Japanese artillery pieces peaked at a maximum of 37 during the incident – about one fourth of those available to the 39th Rifle Corps. Whilst the Japanese gunners fired a total of around 12,000 shells, with the 75mm guns of the 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment accounting for 8,048 of these, the CO of the same unit, who was



A column of T-26 tanks from the 32nd Tank Battalion moving toward the front. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Soviet artillerymen studying their firing coordinates. Despite innumerable problems and from 9 August on, efficient Japanese counterbattery fire, the Soviets won the artillery battle hands down during the incident. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

acting as the overall Japanese artillery commander, assessed that this total corresponded to roughly what the Soviets fired every single day during the incident.

Meanwhile, the Soviets were busying themselves preparing for their new onslaught, with the 32nd Rifle Division and the 2nd Mechanized Brigade arriving close to the front, whilst on 5 August, Moscow authorised strikes across the border if needed, although local commanders were kept under a tight leash to avoid escalating the conflict, thus condemning them to follow the same axis of attack

as the 40th Rifle Division three days previously. Accordingly, the latter unit was concentrated in the south, and reinforced by a tank battalion from the 2nd Mechanized Brigade which added to its own organic tank battalion. Similarly, the fresh 32nd Rifle Division, equally reinforced by a tank battalion, positioned itself to strike from the north. Together with the other subunits of the 2nd Mechanized Brigade which were held in reserve, the Soviets thus had massed more than 20,000 men in front of the Japanese line. This build-up could of course not be hidden from IJA observers sited on the hilltops; by the evening of 5 August, the Japanese estimated that they were facing 22 infantry battalions, 150 tanks

and at least 85 artillery pieces.¹⁵

Fire on the Hills

At dawn, the Soviets were ready for their general counteroffensive, but their initial planning went astray because of the fog which prevented the VVS from conducting the intended air raids in the morning. It was only at 13:30 that the first wave of Soviet bombers appeared over the battlefield. Until 18:00, the Japanese lookouts counted 143 enemy aircraft, including several TB-3 heavy bombers.

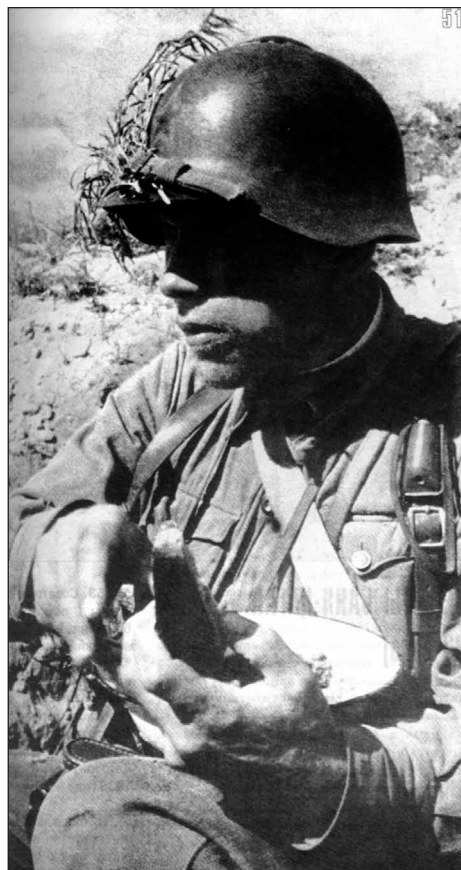
The Soviet airmen dropped a total of 122 tons of bombs that day, losing two aircraft to Japanese AAA. Meanwhile, Soviet artillery had begun to fire in the morning, targeting enemy field fortifications and the 37th Brigade and 75th Infantry Regiment headquarters as well as the river crossing.

At last, the Soviets launched their main assault in the early afternoon. In the south, the 40th Rifle Division launched an all-out advance against Hill 52 at 13:30, with around 50 tanks coming first followed 400 metres behind by waves of riflemen. The defending 3rd Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment had only three Type 94 anti-tank guns available and these opened fire at 800 metres. Before long, the armoured vehicles were targeted by guns emplaced on Changkufeng as well once they came into direct line of sight of the latter. Most of the T-26s were stopped well before closing on the Japanese positions, either because they were damaged or destroyed by the intense anti-tank fire – the three Type 94s had to cease firing at one point because their barrels were overheating or because they had been immobilised by the mud. The assault culminated at 16:00 when a rifle battalion arrived 400 metres from the 3rd Battalion's positions but was stopped by withering Japanese defensive fire. At around 17:30, a single tank actually managed to get within 150 metres of the Japanese line, only to be destroyed by Type 92 HMGs firing armour-piercing rounds.

In the meantime, several groups of tanks with infantry following in their wake advanced between the lake and Hill 52, attempting to outflank the 3rd Battalion and attack one of the heights covering the approach to Changkufeng. Whilst the Japanese company defending this position lost half of its numbers, the attack was repulsed, with the Soviets losing a number of tanks to the marshy ground, the AT gun fire, and to a forlorn hope party of 13 Japanese soldiers who managed to close in undetected and to damage several armoured vehicles but lost eight dead and five wounded in the process.

In the north, the 32nd Rifle Division attacked Shachaofeng and the neighbouring positions at 14:30 and in similar fashion. Lines of tanks advanced, followed in their wake by infantry. Some tanks also provided covering fire, stopping on any small rise they could find to do so, and thus becoming even more vulnerable to Japanese fire. Furthermore, most of the advancing tanks provided the enemy gunners with plenty of opportunity to target their vulnerable belly whilst they were moving over the undulating terrain. Several dozen tanks were thus either destroyed or immobilised well before getting close to the Japanese main defences; out of the 43 tanks attached to the 95th Rifle Regiment, a mere 10 managed to actually get into the immediate proximity of the enemy trenches. Indeed, the mud depth was such that out of the 16 BT-7s of the 2nd Mechanized Brigade's Reconnaissance Battalion sent in a raid against the Japanese line, 14 ended stuck in the mud before reaching the enemy. As a result, the Soviet riflemen had to move unsupported along the last leg of their advance, suffering from grievous casualties as a result. A single battalion managed to get almost to grenade-throwing range of the Japanese positions but was forced to withdraw. By dusk, the Soviets had retreated at least 600 metres from the Japanese positions and began to dig-in.

However, the 39th Rifle Corps did not let the day end without a last hurrah and nearly managed to seize Chengkufeng in the process. At 20:30, elements from the 118th Rifle Regiment launched a surprise attack straight against Changkufeng, by then held by a mere 121 men and before long were on the verge of overwhelming them. Once informed, Colonel Sato, the 73rd Infantry Regiment's commander scraped-up the few elements he could lay his hands on and dispatched them to the hill for a desperate counterattack. In



An exhausted Soviet rifleman eating his ration in the aftermath of another failed assault. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Riflemen taking a break before climbing one the hills once again. After a few days of operations, both the 32nd and 40th Rifle Divisions were badly worn out. (Open source)



The wreck of a T-26 on the slopes of Hill 52. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)



One of the few VVS aircraft shot down by Japanese anti-aircraft fire. (Open source)



19th Division infantrymen moving toward their positions on the hilltops. From 6 August on, the incident was becoming a battle of attrition that the Japanese were bound to lose. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)

turn, both sides engaged in a series of vicious close range battles near the hillcrest, until the Japanese gradually repulsed the Soviet riflemen during the following hours, thanks in great part to the support of their grenade dischargers and also because a lone and understrength company launched a desperate counterattack against the 118th Rifle Regiment's rear, sowing considerable confusion, but being almost annihilated in the process. Few survived out of the 49 men which took part in the infiltration. At dawn the Soviet attack had at last been repulsed. One corporal in charge of a grenade discharger squad gave a first-hand account of the night battle on Chengkufeng:

We set our dischargers straight up and aimed blindly. The fighting was from dark to dark; I only saw the foe at daybreak. We were short of ammo, so we also threw rocks. The enemy was so near that I swatted live Russian grenades back across the crest many times, before they could hit. The Soviets were loaded with grenades. They hurled them or fired grenade rifles, which we lacked. Russian grenades looked like small beer bottles or bowling pins – a better ballistic shape than ours. To activate our special grenades, you had to smack them against something hard, such as a rock or the sole of your shoe. But the enemy version was activated by pulling the safety and then gripping hard. [...] Russian troop strength must have been dwindling, because the number of grenades they threw decreased by morning. By then, I had been hit three times by fragments.¹⁶

The 39th Rifle Corps' assault had been repulsed, but barely, and at a heavy costs for the Japanese units; the 75th Infantry Regiment alone suffered from 47 killed and 85 wounded that day. On the other hand, the Japanese assessed that they had inflicted 1,500 enemy casualties and destroyed 50 tanks.¹⁷

Bloody Hill 52

On 7 August, the 32nd Rifle Division launched a series of battalion-sized attacks from the north, but these were rather easily repulsed by the Japanese left wing. Meanwhile, 114 sorties of the VVS were counted by the Japanese from mid-morning until dusk, including

two formations of fighters which strafed their positions at length, flying at roughly 500 metres, but with the usual lack of results.

Things turned differently, however, in the south, where the 40th Rifle Division launched an all-out assault against an unnamed hill close to Hill 52, dubbed Noguchi Hill by the Japanese after Captain Noguchi Kamenosuke, the CO of the 9th Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment, that defended it. From early morning on, and covered by both heavy artillery and machine gun fire, several waves of riflemen supported by tanks assaulted the 9th Company's positions. The Japanese soldiers resisted fanatically until the unit was almost annihilated around midday with 40 men killed and another 31 wounded, CO included, out of an initial strength of 78.

Meanwhile, Hill 52 itself was pounded by the Soviet artillery until the beginning of the afternoon, whilst snipers and machine gunners were targeting the Japanese trenches using abandoned tank hulks as cover. At last, at 14:30, a regimental-sized force supported by three dozen tanks attacked the hill, initiating a one-and-a-half-hour long battle during which the defending 3rd Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment posed a desperate resistance, launching several last-ditch counterattacks, before repelling the assault, thanks in due part to the timely arrival of the 5th Company, 2nd Battalion, of the 76th Infantry Regiment whilst it was on the verge of collapse. The 3rd Battalion had however been decimated in the process, losing 74 dead including the unit CO, and 85 wounded out of the 328 men available to defend the hill that morning. A Japanese machine gunner of the battalion MG Company gave the following account of the desperate defence of Hill 52:

The Russians' sequence was to deploy, advance, get pushed back, but leave portions behind hiding in dips. Their snipers were superb. [...] We fired at infantry and tanks at a range of 250-300 metres. Artillery and tanks smashed my platoon's two heavy machine guns that day; each time the gunners were killed, I took over the piece and fired as long as possible. In the afternoon, the combat was really confused. I remember a charge: I had only a bayonet and had to take a rifle from a corpse. It was a matter of moving or grenades would get you. You took cover, getting deep into dead angles. Only one other soldier and I in our whole

An Elusive Armoured Train

The Changkufeng Incident was the first during which the Japanese deployed both railway artillery and the only Type 94 armoured train ever produced. Since at least the early 1920s, the Kwantung Army had converted several trains into improvised armoured trains by equipping them with heavy weapons and locally mounted armour plate. In turn, these proved invaluable during the swift conquest of Manchuria because of their ability to move troops from one strategic place to the other whilst carrying significant amounts of firepower to support their infantry complement once it had disembarked. On repeated occasions, the arrival of such an armoured train in a city station had proved enough to unsettle the local Chinese garrison. Unsurprisingly, the Japanese decided thereafter to develop a model of armoured train designed as such from the start. This in turn gave birth to a massive steel behemoth; the Type 94 armoured train.

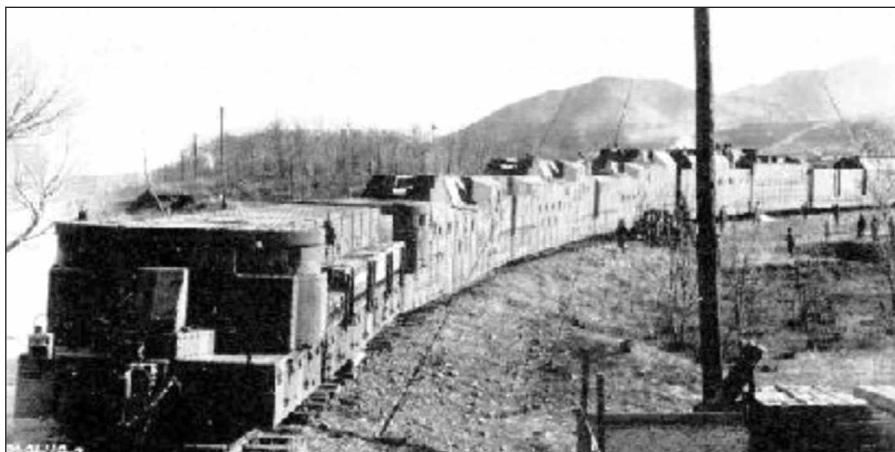
The Type 94 train was composed in 1938 of a locomotive and seven wagons. The first, the so-called reconnaissance wagon weighed 50 tons and was equipped with a 300mm searchlight and two Type 92 13.2mm HMGs. The following two wagons were artillery platforms. Each of these weighed 60 tons and carried a single purpose-made 100mm gun developed by the Army Ordnance Bureau in 1931 and two Type 92 HMGs. The fourth wagon, of the same weight, carried two Type 88 75mm AA guns, whilst the fifth was the train's 60-ton command and fire control centre, equipped with a series of long and short range radios, as well as another two Type 92 HMGs. The locomotive and a tender followed, and with the latter another pair of Type 92 HMGs. Finally came a power supply wagon carrying several generators,

batteries, a radio room and two Type 92 HMGs. The Type 94 had a maximum speed of 65 km/hour and carried enough coal for a 150 kilometre journey. By 1938, the Japanese had become wary of the inherent vulnerability of such a giant tied to the rail tracks and took great care to deploy it in utmost secrecy to preserve the effect of surprise, to the extent of systematically feeding false information to local civilians about its whereabouts.

In the summer of 1938, the train, officially the 2nd Armoured Train Unit, was stationed in Dairan and led by Lieutenant Colonel Morita Sutezo. On 6 August, it was ordered to move toward Hsinasan where it arrived on 10 August after completing its preparations. At dawn the following day, the train moved toward the battle area before stopping and preparing to fire against Soviet positions. The Type 94's artillerymen were however delayed because the train could not establish contact with the Japanese overall artillery commander and Lieutenant Colonel Morita thus had to acquire the coordinates of several Soviet forward artillery observers' positions on his own. At last, the two 100mm guns opened up at 05:00 and fired a total of 51 rounds against their targets located 13,500 metres away during the next two hours. In turn, the Soviets threw some counterbattery fire but their shells constantly fell at least 1,000 metres away, although right into other Japanese positions. Once the Soviet artillery fire subsided and concluding that the enemy spotters had been neutralised by his guns, Lieutenant Colonel Morita moved the train back toward Hslnasan. The return journey proved eventful however as the appearance of VVS aircraft forced the armoured train to rush into a tunnel where it took shelter to avoid detection.



A view of one of the Type 94's two 60-ton wagons carrying a 100mm gun. (Open source)



The armoured behemoth on the move, first is the reconnaissance wagon, followed by the three wagons carrying the two 100mm and two 75mm guns. (Open source)

company emerged unscratched, though we fought at Hill 52 to the end. (Quoted from Coox 1977 p. 253)¹⁸

In the evening, the worn out 1st Battalion, 73rd Infantry Regiment, with 203 men on its roster, arrived on Hill 52 to reinforce the remnants of the 3rd Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment. That day, the 19th Division ordered the 74th Infantry Regiment – its last uncommitted infantry unit – to move from its garrison toward the battle area, together with the 38th Brigade headquarters. The Japanese however were not alone in finding it harder to feed the meat-grinder. Soviet losses, whilst constantly overestimated by the Japanese, who claimed to have annihilated two out of the three battalions which attacked Hill 52 that day, were nonetheless heavy, especially so in terms of armoured vehicles. By the end of the afternoon of 7 August, the 32nd Rifle Division's tank battalion had only seven tanks operational out of the 32 T-26s and 20 T-37s available four days earlier.¹⁹

Of Artillery and Riflemen

That the 39th Rifle Corps' tank crew were suffering heavily without gaining much in return became all too obvious from 8 August on, when the Japanese noticed a marked decrease in tank use. Not so for the VVS which flew at least 110 sorties during the afternoon but lost one I-15 fighter claimed as shot down by the Japanese. However, the adverse weather prevented the VVS bombers and fighters from intervening on 9 August. The 39th Rifle Corps did not stay idle either, even though it soon turned out that the 40th Rifle Division had given up any attempt to launch large-scale attacks, dispatching instead multiple but much smaller assault teams.

Hill 52 was largely left alone on 8 August, with the Soviets contenting themselves to surround it with a series of foxholes around 300 metres from the Japanese positions and from where snipers and machine guns harassed its defenders – as did the artillery – whilst a second line was held by more troops another 500 metres behind. At dawn, a large-scale assault was launched against Changkufeng with heavy artillery support, but this was repulsed by mid-morning, as was another one which took place during the afternoon. The following night, the Soviets attacked Changkufeng again along two different axes whilst their artillery was firing on pre-registered coordinates, pounding the Japanese positions along the hillcrest, but this was repulsed again by the Japanese soldiers who were better-trained in night combat. To add to the confusion, in the south, the 3rd Battalion, 76th Infantry Regiment launched a night attack on its own in an attempt to retake Noguchi Hill but faced extremely fierce enemy resistance and had to give up after seizing a few enemy forward positions.

On 9 August, in the mid-morning and in the wake of an intensive artillery preparation, the 40th Rifle Division attacked Hill 52 again, but the riflemen could not advance further than their outpost line, 300 metres away from the enemy, until 12:30 when the artillery barrage resumed, growing in intensity as the hours went by. By day's end, the 1st Battalion, 73rd Infantry Regiment alone had lost 31 soldiers killed and another 52 wounded – out of the 203 who had arrived the previous evening – to the combination of infantry attacks and artillery. Indeed, the Soviet artillery was pushing the Japanese defending Hill 52 to the verge of despair, at least according to Major

Kokima Saburo, the 1st Battalion's CO, who sent the following plea to the Right Wing HQ: "The enemy's barrages have been massive; most works have been smashed and our casualties are mounting. We are all eager to sortie rather than remain inactive and perish uselessly".²⁰

During the night, the Japanese had no choice but to order the 74th Infantry Regiment to cross the Tumen River and reinforce their beleaguered units. Whilst Japanese signals intelligence concluded that the 39th Rifle Corps was also suffering from unsustainable casualties, the latter nonetheless launched other attacks on 10 August. At 09:00 in the morning, a massive three-pronged assault targeted Changkufeng but failed again, whilst during the afternoon, a battalion-sized force made another attempt against the same position. This time at last, the Soviets managed to keep a small foothold on the hill. In the meantime, a number of smaller, company-sized forays were launched against other Japanese positions.

To add insult to injury, the weather cleared during the afternoon, and from 16:00 to 19:30, the VVS reappeared in strength over the battlefield, with at least 72 sorties, although the reinforced Japanese anti-aircraft artillery claimed to have shot down two I-15 fighters. Whilst the line had held again, the 19th Division knew it was on the ropes with most of its units worn out by the fighting; on 8 August, the 75th Infantry Regiment had 826 men left on its rosters, out of the 1,406 men available on 30 July. Indeed, plans had been drawn up for a unilateral withdrawal if needed, whilst on the evening of 10 August, Colonel Nakamura Yoshiaki, the 19th Division's Chief of Staff, cabled to Korea Army HQ to urge for a diplomatic settlement to the incident, arguing that: "There is a danger of radical change in combat situation in a few days if matters go on [...] It is estimated that this division has only one or two days left in which it can retain definite freedom of action – initiative to advance or retreat."²¹

Even worse, the Korea Army had no other units available to fuel the furnace and the only thing it could do was to prepare for the dispatch of 1,000 recruits from its existing depots to make do for the losses. Furthermore, the AGS authorised the beefing up of the 19th Division to its wartime strength establishment from 12 August on and began to draw 1,500 men from divisions garrisoned in Japan. Of course, this would not only take time but be in practice a difficult proposition for a unit fully committed in protracted combat operations and which could collapse in a matter of days if the Soviets launched another series of large-scale assaults. The AGS indeed did not nurture any illusions in this regard and planned secretly for a night withdrawal of the 19th Division to the other side of the river if needed. The only solace was, however, that the 39th Rifle Corps had also been badly bruised, with both the 32nd and 40th Rifle Divisions unable to launch new massive attacks anymore.²² A radio message from the OKVDA chief political commissar to Moscow, intercepted by IJA signals intelligence, stated that:

Marshal Blyukher issued orders [...] to retake Changkufeng [...]. Although our forces repeatedly launched powerful attacks against the hill, the situation is not favourable. Japanese troops are not

Table 10: Japanese Infantry Casualties

Unit	Strength	Losses	Casualties as percentage of initial strength
73rd Infantry Regiment	1,068	93 KIA, 90 WIA	17.1 percent
74th Infantry Regiment	1,461	3 KIA, 33 WIA	2.5 percent
75th Infantry Regiment	1,379	241 KIA, 467 WIA	51.3 percent
76th Infantry Regiment	1,094	138 KIA, 197 WIA	30.6 percent

only holding the positions tenaciously but their artillery – firing with extraordinary accuracy and effectiveness – has hurt our tank units, and our forces have fallen frequently into difficulty. Not a few of our officers and men could not be relied on and the political bureau staff has had to mete out severe punishments. Our casualties have amounted to 3,300; if we continue fighting under these conditions, another 5,000 casualties will be incurred within five or six days.”²³

Fight and Talk

Whilst the 19th Division and the 39th Rifle Corps were battering each other, both Moscow and Tokyo remained eager to avoid a full-scale war with Moscow being of course aware that the Japanese had their hands full in China but also wary about the then ongoing Czechoslovakian Crisis that was threatening to engulf Europe in a new war. Still, the Soviets felt that they had the upper hand and contrary to earlier times, kept a strong position during the first diplomatic parleys which began as early as 14 July. Indeed, during several of its meetings with Shigemitsu Mamoru, the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow, and Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, the latter invariably demanded a withdrawal of Japanese troops from the alleged Soviet territory as a prerequisite for a ceasefire.

On 9 August, the AGS issued a series of orders in an attempt to pressure the Soviets into loosening their diplomatic hand. The 104th Division, which was garrisoned in Dairen, Manchuria, but under direct AGS control was instructed to move toward the Korean border. Furthermore, the same day, and with AGS approval, the Kwantung Army placed all its units under first-stage alert and ordered the 2nd and 7th Divisions to rally the 12th Division, and be ready to launch an advance from Wuchiatzu straight to Posyet, thus threatening to encircle the entire 39th Rifle Corps.

Whilst the impact of this bluff on Moscow remains unknown, the Japanese gave up and on 10 August Ambassador Shigemitsu informed Litvinov that they agreed to withdraw 1,000 metres away from their current positions in exchange for a ceasefire. However, and surprisingly enough, the Soviets did not take up the offer and went instead for a ceasefire based on the current belligerent positions, beginning at midday 11 August. A mixed commission was to delimitate the border thereafter. The following morning, the 39th Rifle Corps artillery gave a parting shot by firing a massive barrage on Japanese positions before the guns went silent, thus ending the Changkufeng Incident. Relieved, the AGS took no chances and ordered a withdrawal of the 19th Division to the right bank of the Tumen, which was executed on 13 and 14 August, leaving the Soviets in control of the hard-fought-for hills.²⁴

A Self-Critical Victor

Obviously, the Soviets could claim that they were the victor of the battle at Lake Khasan; after all, they had forced the Japanese to give up both Changkufeng and Shachaofeng hills. However, the RKKA proved less than pleased with its performance during the battle which had cost 717 soldiers killed in action, another 75 that went missing and a staggering 2,752 wounded, 66 of whom would die subsequently from their injuries. Furthermore, 527 men went sick, mostly because the Army failed to provide the troops with enough potable water, and this out of a total of 22,950 men who took part in the battle. Unsurprisingly, the riflemen bore the brunt of these casualties with 366 killed, whilst the tank crews suffered from 33 dead.

Aside of 32 guns destroyed or damaged, the 39th Rifle Corps had lost 24 tanks completely destroyed and at least another 56 damaged. Of course, the local geography and political decision to keep the incident limited had forced the Soviets to launch frontal attacks against an entrenched and determined enemy in particularly unfavourable terrain, thus making heavy losses virtually unavoidable. However, multiple failures among the military had further aggravated this, at least according to Protocol Number 18 of the Main Military Soviet of 31 August 1938:

Events of these few days have uncovered considerable defects in the state of the Far Eastern Red Banner Front. The military preparation of troops, headquarters and the commanders of the Front was of an unacceptably low standard. Military units were not coherent and not ready for action; supply for combat units had not been organised. It was discovered that the Far Eastern theatre was poorly prepared for war (roads, bridges, communications). [...] Forces were completely unprepared as they moved out towards the border after the alarm was raised [...] in many instances whole artillery batteries appeared at the front without munitions [...] All branches, but especially the infantry, revealed an inability to function on the battlefield, to manoeuvre, to integrate fire and manoeuvre and to make use of the terrain. Tanks were used in a clumsy manner, as a result of which they suffered heavy material losses.²⁵

Of course, no mention was made of the consequences of the purges upon the 39th Rifle Corps' effectiveness, whilst there were multiple examples of officers taking over their units in the weeks preceding the battle to replace their liquidated predecessors, such as in the case of the 2nd Mechanized Brigade which lost its CO on 28 July 1938. To the contrary, the OKVDA itself was split into the 1st and 2nd Independent Red Banner Far Eastern Armies during the battle whilst its already marked commander, Marshal Blyukher, was made a scapegoat for all these deficiencies; he was arrested on 22 October and executed on 9 November 1938.

The VVS's performance was also lacklustre; whilst it benefited from complete air supremacy and flew at least 693 sorties between 1 and 10 August, dropping hundreds of tons of bombs in the process, these accounted for only eight Japanese killed and another 30 wounded. The Japanese also claimed to have shot down eight aircraft, including four I-15 fighters.

Still, and despite countless self-inflicted difficulties, the 39th Rifle Corps improved its tactics, noticeably its artillery effectiveness, as the days went by and managed to mercilessly attrite the 19th Division, pushing it to the verge of collapse. Indeed, and considering that they were attacking frontally an enemy entrenched on high ground, it might be argued that whilst heavy, Soviet losses were not that much greater than those of the Japanese.²⁶

Self-Delusional Japanese

The IJA lost 526 dead and 913 wounded out of the 6,814 men engaged directly in the Changkufeng Incident. 37 percent of these casualties were due to artillery fire, 36 percent to small arms fire and another 23 percent to grenades. As with the Soviets, it was the infantry regiments which bore the brunt of these casualties with 475 killed in total.

The Japanese considered however that their reconnaissance in force at Changkufeng had been successful; the operation allowed them to be certain that the Soviets were not willing to engage in a full-scale war and were thus free to pursue the Wuhan operation

in China as intended. The AGS was pleased with both the fighting spirit and the combat preparedness shown by the troops during the incident although organisation and equipment were “not the best”, noticeably because there were not enough engineers available to wage such a battle – a nice euphemism considering that they had been completely outmatched by the Soviet artillery whilst the enemy tanks had been countered by the local terrain much more than by the 19th Division’s limited anti-tank arsenal.

On the other hand, that Japan could have been engulfed in a conflict that it had not the means to wage was not discussed much thereafter. Despite finding itself engaged in a such a classical attritional battle, the Army did not question its doctrine either as, after all, the 19th Division had been tied down to a defensive stance, and thus could not deploy fully the offensive tactics which were supposed to counter the Soviet material superiority.²⁷ In essence, and once again, the IJA had played with fire, got away with it, and failed to draw meaningful lessons, and this played a crucial role in the disaster that was to befall another Japanese division almost exactly one year later, at least according to Lieutenant Colonel Tsuchiya Sakae, Intelligence Staff Officer in the Korea Army Headquarters: “If only the incident of 1938 had been studied intensively by Japan, a disaster such as occurred at Nomonhan in the next year would have been prevented.”²⁸

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NOTES

Introduction

- 1 Subchapter based on Evans & Peattie pp.4-5, McDonald pp.19-24, Koichi, pp.7-8, Bernard pp.21-24, Drea (2009), pp.1-5, 19, 35, 42, 73, & Encyclopaedia Britannica, on line version, "Meiji Restoration" and "Meiji" entries, extracted 17 January 2021
- 2 The Chinese Peiyang (Northern Sea) Fleet was a force to be reckon with as it was composed of modern vessels, including two German-built battleships and eight armoured cruisers. See Jowett 2013 p.19.
- 3 Subchapter based on Evans & Peattie pp.41-46, Bernard pp.25-26, Drea (2009), pp.52, 70, 78-81, 86, 90-91; McDonald, pp.24-26; Harries, p.57; Jowett (2013), pp.25-38.
- 4 Drea (2009), pp.97-99.
- 5 Drea (2009), pp.101-119; Jukes, pp.14-15, 51, 67; Harries pp.83, 90.
- 6 Drea (2009), pp.108-109, Jukes, p.15, Harris p.91; Evans and Peattie pp.110-129.
- 7 Subchapter drawn from Harries pp.110-111, 122-124; Bernard p.33; Drea (2009), pp.137, 142-145; McDonald pp.41, 47.
- 8 Bernard, pp.37-38, 42; Drea (2009), pp.149, 153, 163; Harries pp.133, 138-140.

Chapter 1

- 1 Bernard p.48; Coox (1985), pp.19-20; Drea (2009), p.167; Goldman pp.14-15; Mc Donald pp.48-49, 52, 167.
- 2 Two of these battalions were dissolved in 1925 and reactivated in 1929, Coox 1985 p.8
- 3 Coox (1985), pp.1-8, Mc Donald p.41, Paine p.23, 28, Goldman p.16, Mc Donald p.55
- 4 Coox (1985), pp.12-14; Mc Donald pp.49-53; Jowett, (2013), pp.117-121, 125, 132-165; Grandolini, A., "Le grand tourment sous le ciel. Première période: Les Seigneurs de Guerre" in www.l'autrecotedelacolline.blogspot.com, Part I, 16 September 2013 and Part II, 20 September 2013.
- 5 Drea (2009), p.166; Coox (1985), pp.15-16; McDonald pp.53-54; Paine p.55; Walker pp.129-134.
- 6 Pain, pp.86-87; Jowett (2013), pp.173-174; Goldman, p.10; Department of the Army, pp.56-60.
- 7 Coox (1985), pp.26-28; Drea (2009), pp.166-168; Goldman p.16, Jowett (2013), pp.180-182; McDonald pp.56-57; Ness (2014) pp.16-17; Kitamura pp.128-132, 136, 145.
- 8 Quoted from Birolli, p.148. (author's translation)
- 9 Birolli, pp.121-151; Coox (1985), pp.28; Drea (2009), p.168; Hata et al (2002) p.2; Jowett (2013), pp.180-182; Kitamura, pp.154, 157; McDonald, p.58; Ness pp.18-19; Pain pp.13-14.
- 10 Bernard, pp.48-49; Birolli, pp.157-162; Coox, p.45; Drea (2009), pp.171-174; Jowett (2013) p.185; Harmsen, pp.20-21; Harries, pp.159-161; Hata et al (2011), p.2; Long-hsuen, p.158; Ness, p.340; "The Japanese attacks at Shanghai and the defense by the Chinese. 1931-1932", Major E.D. Cook, Infantry Military Review, December 1937, retrieved via Axis History Forum, 12 February 2021.
- 11 Bernard, p.50; Birolli, p.182; McDonald, p.63; Jowett (2011), pp.13, 37; Jowett (2013), p.196
- 12 Birolli, pp.153, 154; McDonald, p.60
- 13 Birolli, pp.155-156, 165-166; McDonald, p.60
- 14 Bernard, pp.52, 56-58; Drea (2009), pp.169-170, pp.180-181.
- 15 Bernard, pp. 65-70; Drea (2009), p.191; Coox (1985), pp. 69-72M; Jowett (2011), p.14; Peattie et al p.105.
- 16 Quoted from Peattie, p.104.

- 17 Bernard, pp.75-77; Jowett (2013), p.224; Ness & Shih, pp.79, 93; Peattie, pp.85-90, 97-104.
- 18 Quoted from Peattie, p.85.
- 19 Jowett (2013), pp.237-241, 254; Ness & Shih (2016), pp.22-24, 28-31; Peattie pp.165-168.
- 20 Bernard, pp.78-82; Harmsen (2013), pp.255-260; Harmsen (2015), pp.270-171; Jowett (2013), pp.22-25, 241-251; Lai, pp.XXX; Ness & Shih (2016), pp.25-28. The number of victims of the Rape of Nanking is from Bernard p.82, whilst a number of other sources mention 300,000 dead in total. The reasons for the Japanese atrocities are numerous and complex, one of them being the hatred caused by the fierce Chinese resistance during the battle of Shanghai.
- 21 Bernard, pp.82-84; Jowett (2013), pp.260-266; Ness & Shih (2016) pp.32-36; Peattie, pp.32-36, 190-215
- 22 Bernard, pp.87-89; Jowett (2013), p.272; Ness & Shih (2016), pp.37-38; Peattie, pp.202, 216, 218; Adrien Fontanellaz, "Les Rikko japonais ou l'échec d'un concept" in *aerjournal* no 57, February-March 2017.

Chapter 2

- 1 Nakatsu, p.290; Drea (2009), pp.22-23, 28-31, 52-56.
- 2 Drea, (2009), pp.25-27, 57-59, 68, 93; Nakatsu p.410, 421, 424-425, 428.
- 3 Quoted from Nakatsu. p.421, author translation.
- 4 Quoted from Schultz, pp.8-9.
- 5 Drea (2009), pp.93, 126-127, 132-134, 152; Rottman (2005), p.19; Rottman & Welpy (2005), pp.5, 9; Peattie, pp.115-116; Schultz p.8.
- 6 Drea (2009), pp.146-158; Peattie p.112; Rottman & Welpy (2005), pp.30-32.
- 7 Drea (2009), pp.187-188. It must be kept in mind however that in 1940, 90% of the Wehrmacht's divisions were not motorised either.
- 8 Table from Ness (2014), p.21.
- 9 Ness (2014) pp.14-16, 20-21, 53-55, 57, 62-65, 69-70, 175; Ness (2015), pp.30,31,36, 50, 54, 56; Rottman (2005), pp.23-24, 27-32, 35; Peattie, pp.115, 118-119; Drea (2009), pp.186, 198; Ness (2015), p.45 that the Type 96 LMG began to be mass-produced in 1940 and thus the Type 11 remained the standard LMG in use until then. Indeed, 9,662 of these were produced during the Fiscal Year 1939.
- 10 Drea (2009), pp.187-188; Peattie p.119; Ness (2014), pp.287, 288, 289, 308-309; Ness (2015), pp.112, 116-117, 120-135, 168-169, 183-187.
- 11 Fontanellaz (2016); Zaloga (2007), pp.5-10; Rottman & Takizawa, pp.3-7, 12-14, 27; Ness (2014), pp.249, 256-257; Ness (2015), pp.263-265.

Chapter 3

- 1 Coox (1985), pp.78, 92; Erickson, pp.304, 339, 357, 358, 360; Goldman, pp.16-20; Mc Donald pp.84-87.
- 2 Coox (1985), pp.92-96, 105-109; Goldman, pp.18, 28-32; Mc Donald pp.90-91.
- 3 Hooton, p.viii
- 4 Territorial divisions were subdivided in several categories, from first line to third line, with varying permanent cadres. See Erickson, p.181.
- 5 Erickson, pp.167, 181, 183, 262, 326; Hooton, p. IX, 2; Walker pp.164-165, 167-168, 173.
- 6 Bernard, pp.33-35, 106; Erickson, pp.316-317, 346, 351; Glantz, pp.2-3, 16, 52; Hooton, pp.2, 6-7, 13; Walker p.169.
- 7 Erickson, pp.270, 350, 387; Glantz (1990), pp.10, 19-21; Walker p.172.
- 8 Glantz (1984), pp.5, 8-9, 16-17.
- 9 Hooton, pp.30 and 75.

- 10 Erickson, pp.270, 327, 389-390; Glantz (1990), pp.9-10, 21-25, 30; Hooton, pp.7, 10-13.
- 11 Bernard, pp.109-110; Glantz (1990), pp.39, 52; Hooton, pp.16, 20-21, 26,28; Lopez & Otkhmezuri pp.224-228.
- 12 Initially the Separate Far Eastern Army. The honorific "Red Banner" title was added in 1930 in the aftermath of the victory against China. See <http://eng.mil.ru/en/structure/okruga/east/history.htm> extracted 29 March 2021
- 13 Table drawn from Erikson, p.360.
- 14 Erikson, pp.65, 228-229, 240-241, 360, 363, 397-399, 405, 451; Hooton pp.IX, 37-38; Walker pp.174, 195-196.
- 15 Erikson, pp.469,492, 517; Hooton, p.40, <http://eng.mil.ru/en/structure/okruga/east/history.htm>, extracted 29 March 2021
- 16 Quoted from Coox (1985), p.164.
- 17 Coox (1985), p.167; Worden & Savada, pp.229-231; Prnatt, pp.9, 18, 22; Kolomiets via AMVAS, retrieved on <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/rkkaww2/>, 2 April 2021.
- 18 Coox (1985), pp.152-157, 166; Kotelnikov, pp.5-6; Worden & Savada, p.46; Erickson, p.415, 519; Nediadialkov, pp.13-14, Kolomiets via AMVAS, retrieved on <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/rkkaww2/>, 2 April 2021.
- 19 Quoted from Coox (1985), p.164.
- 20 Table drawn from Kolomiets via AMVAS, retrieved on <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/rkkaww2/>, 2 April 2021.
- 21 Quoted from Goldman. p.35.
- 22 Erickson p.490; Goldman pp.33-35; Gustavsson, pp.20, 31-33, 56; Maslov, pp.33-34; Peattie pp.288-291.
- 23 Rottman and Takizawa, p.10; Drea (2009), p.198; Ness (2014), pp.217-218, 236, 249-250, 259, 293, 308-309; Coox, pp.83-84, 183-184.
- 24 Subchapter drawn from Jowett (2004), pp.7-8, 10-17, 27-30, 91.
- 25 Lee, p. IV, V, 5-11
- 26 Sorge was born in Baku to a German father and Russian mother, though returned to Germany where he was brought up.
- 27 Quoted from Kotani
- 28 Preceding subchapter drawn from Kotani, Coox (1985), pp.79-81.
- 29 Quoted from Coox (1985), p.86.
- 30 Quoted from Coox (1985), p.86.
- 31 Coox (1985), pp.87-89, 91; McDonald, pp.97-102, 111-115, 117-121; Sapir pp.100-106.
- 9 Quoted from Coox (1977), p.208.
- 10 quoted from Hill p.87.
- 11 Coox (1977), pp.189, 205, 208-209, 212-214, 218; Hooton p.44; Hill, pp.86, 87, 88; Department of the Army pp. 69-70; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956, pp.99, 104-105, 108-109.
- 12 quoted from Coox (1977), p.219.
- 13 quoted from Coox (1977), p.225.
- 14 quoted from Coox (1977), p.224.
- 15 Coox (1977), pp.220-227, 267, 281; Coox (1985), p.135; Erikson p.498; Zaloga (2016) p.36; Hill, pp.88-90; Hooton p.44; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956, pp.107, 111, 123, 128.
- 16 Quoted from Coox (1977), p.241.
- 17 Erikson p.498; Zaloga (2016), p.32; Hill p.88; Hooton pp.44-45; Coox (1977), pp.228, 231-236, 241, 244, 247; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956 pp.100, 112.
- 18 Office of the Chief Military History 9 July 1956, pp.149-154, Type 94 Armored Train (plala.or.jp), Akira Takizawa, www.oocities.org/sadakichi09/army/IJ-MRAT.htm Akira Sahara, retrieved 20 April 2021
- 19 Hill p.88; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956 pp.101, 112; Coox (1977), pp.249-260.
- 20 Quoted from Coox (1977), p.271. Sortie in the sense of counter-attacking the enemy. Major Kokima might have alluded to the *gyokusai* (shattered jewel) practice, that is a self-destructive charge, used time and again by doomed IJA units later on during the Pacific War, and more widely known as "Banzai Charge" among US troops.
- 21 Quoted from Coox (1977), p.288.
- 22 Hill p.88; Coox (1977), pp.264-268, 270-273, 278-281, 288-289; Coox (1985), p.136; Hill p.8; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956 pp.102, 112.
- 23 Quoted from Coox (1977), p.310.
- 24 Coox (1985), p.136-139; Coox (1977), pp.289, 292-294, 297, 299, 302, 307-308; Goldman pp.69-73; Hooton p.45.
- 25 Extracts quoted from Hill, pp.89-91.
- 26 Department of the Army (1996), pp.64-68; Erickson, pp.497-499; Hill, pp.87-91. Of note is that Hooton (p.46), using other sources, mentions nine Tanks completely destroyed, and another 76 damaged, of which 39 were repaired.
- 27 Office of the Chief of Military History, 9 July 1956, pp.120-123; Coox (1977), pp.283, 285, 360-361.
- 28 Quoted from Coox (1977), p.361

Chapter 4

- 1 Quoted from Coox (1985), p.124.
- 2 Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956, pp.28, 33, 35; Schultz pp.21-22; Coox (1985), pp.120-121, 129-130; Coox (1977) pp.3, 11-12, 14-16, 26, 42, 44, 75, 79, 84; Erickson p.494
- 3 Hooton, p.43.
- 4 Coox (1977), pp.83-84, 88-89; Coox (1985), p.132; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956 pp. 62-64, 65; Schulz p.24. Of note is that Shachaofeng Hill was known to the Soviets as Bezymyannaya, literally "no-name hill", whilst Changkufeng was named Zaozernaya.
- 5 Coox (1977), pp.103, 131, 136, 140, 156-157, 162; Coox (1985), pp.132-133; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956, pp. 62-64, 68-72, 81-82, 87; Schultz, pp.26-27. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions/75th Regiment are not usually mentioned in sources such as Coox, because they were not directly part of the Changkufeng action and probably arrived in the area between the 30 and 31 July.
- 6 Quoted from Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956, pp.91-92.
- 7 Coox (1977), pp.187, 188; Office of the Chief of Military History 9 July 1956, pp.97-99, Hooton p.43. Number and type of aircraft involved as those recorded by the Japanese.
- 8 Quoted from Coox (1977), p.188

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